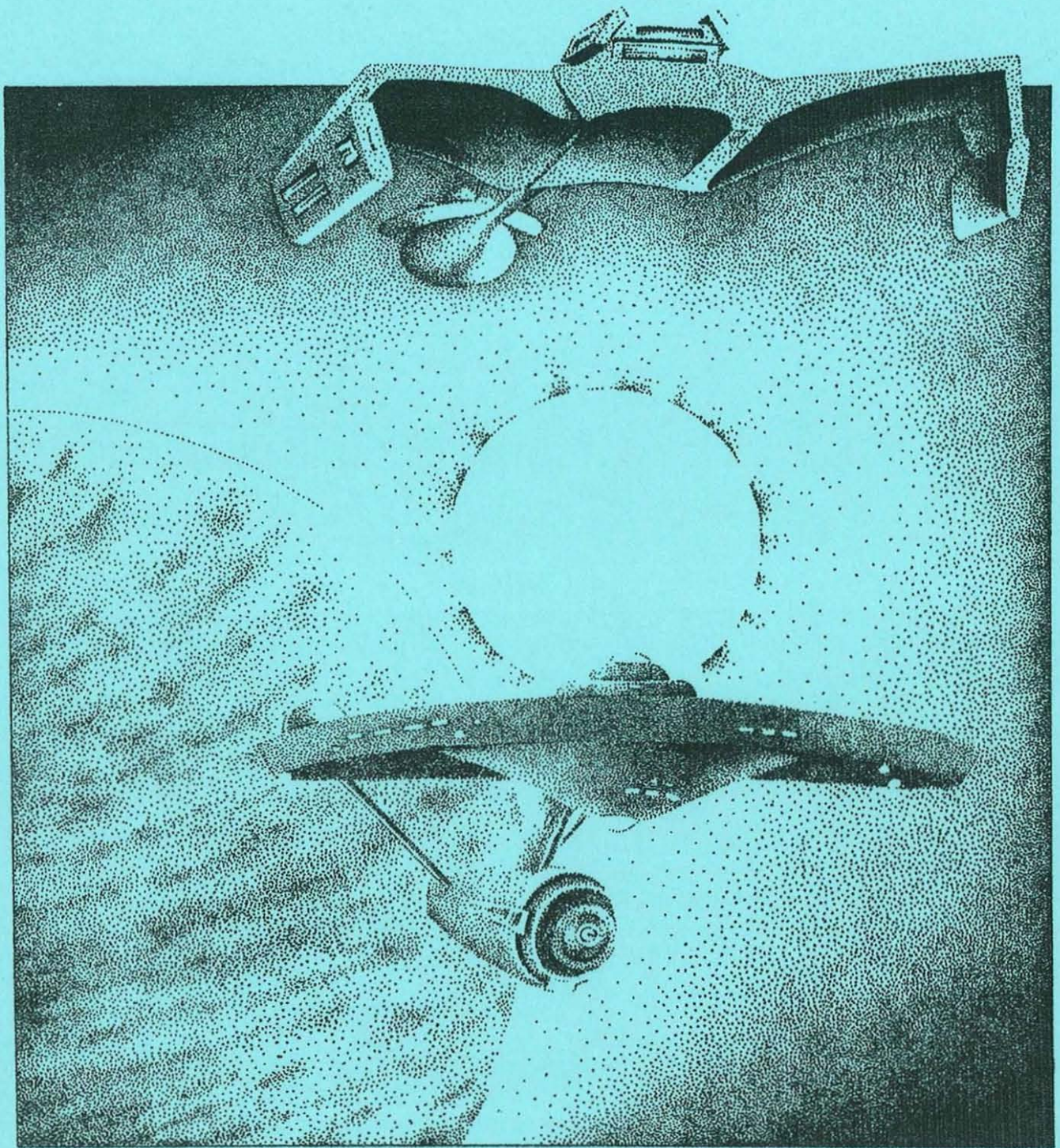


Scotpress

FOREWARNED



a STAR TREK
fanzine

Liz Butler

FOREWARNED

by

LIZ BUTLER

illos by

ANN HUMPHREY

A ScoTpress publication

Editors -- Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini

Typing -- Sheila Clark

Proofreading -- Sheila's Chain Gang

Printing -- Janet Quarton & James T.

Collating -- Sheila's Chain Gang -- Allison Rooney, Lorraine Goodison, Hilde McCabe,
Cory King, Frances Abernethy.

Distracting -- Shona (you haven't spoken to me for all of two minutes!)

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Sheila Clark

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June 1982

ScoTpress -- Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona.

Writorial

Anyone having read Karen Hayden's zine 'One Last Wish Fulfilled' will, no doubt, notice certain 'similarities' in the first half of this story.

I freely admit that my story was written as a direct result of reading Karen's zine.

I agree that a 'death' story does give enormous scope for bringing people's deepest emotions to the surface. On the other hand, I personally find the death of a well-loved character extremely distressing.

Karen's story gave me an idea for a story of my own, whereby I could utilise the death theme to the full, without anyone actually dying.

Liz Butler

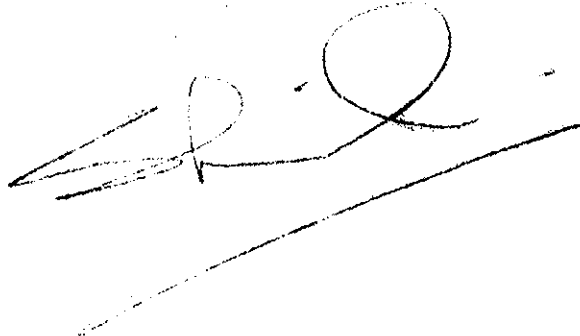
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Editorial

When Liz first submitted her story to us, we did feel slightly dubious about printing it because of the source of her inspiration. However, we very carefully checked Liz's story and Karen's against each other, and decided that although there are similarities, the differences were great enough that we could accept it; we have never subscribed to the view that because one person has written a story on a certain theme, nobody else should ever try to develop that theme. There are, after all, very few basic themes in fiction anyway. The important thing, we believe, is the ultimate development of the story, and the 'taste' it leaves in the reader's mind.

In some ways, zine writing is a very incestuous pursuit; I doubt that there are many fan writers who have not, at some time, taken inspiration from another story. And in a way it's quite a compliment to have produced something that another writer feels strongly enough about to produce his/her own story as a result.

We very much enjoyed this story; we hope you will enjoy it as much as we did.



FORWARDED

PART ONE

Captain James T. Kirk sat back in the command chair, absently tapping the arm as he gazed at the image of the lush, blue-green planet rotating slowly below the orbiting Enterprise. Yielding to an elusive feeling of...unease, he stabbed the communicator button. "Enterprise to Mr. Spock."

"Spock here, Captain."

"Spock, how are you doing down there?"

There was a slight pause. "How am I doing what, sir?"

Kirk grinned. His First Officer never missed an opportunity to pinpoint irregularities of Human speech. It was a source of great amusement to his colleagues, a fact with which he was well acquainted, which was very probably why he persisted in the practice. "All right, Mister. You know what I mean, so cut the comedy and answer the question."

"Very well, Captain. Although I must point out that my observation was not intended to be humorous." Before Kirk had time to reply to that little gem, Spock went on smoothly. "The survey bears out initial sensor reports. There is no trace of sentient life, and the tricorders have detected nothing so far that would have an adverse effect on humanoid life. Some small animals, an abundance of plant life and edible vegetation, and large expanses of fresh water. The atmosphere is, relatively, Earth normal, and the climate...pleasantly warm."

"What he means, Jim, is that it's bloody hot down here!"

"Hi, Bones. It's not as bad as that, is it?"

"We-ll," drawled the doctor, "I sure wouldn't want to settle here."

Laughing, Kirk asked, "How long do you think it will take to complete the survey, Spock?"

"There appears to be a break in the forest, approximately one kilometre ahead, Captain. I think it would be wise to proceed in that direction, in order to determine the nature of the surrounding countryside. I would estimate that it will take us twenty minutes to cover that distance, allowing for the roughness of the terrain."

"O.K., Spock. Report back in twenty minutes. And, Spock...be careful. Kirk out."

Spock closed the communicator with a snap, and glanced at his companion. "Are you ready to proceed, Doctor?"

Rubbing a weary hand over his sweating brow, McCoy scowled at him. "Ready as I'll ever be. Why do I always manage to get stuck with surveys of tropical rain forests?"

"Might I remind you, that it was at your own request that you joined the landing party?"

McCoy didn't deign to answer that, and stalked off ahead, muttering darkly about Vulcan know-alls, and 'fates that had it in for him'; Spock followed, an eyebrow raised in amusement, and the two security guards brought up the rear. The 'roughness of the terrain' was an understatement if ever there was one. All manner of creeping plants twisted and snaked their way round exposed tree roots, and thorny bushes grew in abundance, catching at hair, clothes and hands. After his second headlong plunge into the undergrowth, McCoy scrambled to his feet, shrugging off the Vulcan's helping hand.

"If I'd had the slightest inkling of what was down here, I'd have stayed on the ship! My name's McCoy, not Livingstone! I'm getting too old for this lark!"

"As I pointed out, Doctor..."

"Yeah. I know. It's my own fault. How much further?"

Spock glanced at his tricorder and peered ahead. "We ~~are~~ almost at our objective. Another hundred metres...and I would suggest that we proceed with caution. Indications are that the land terminates abruptly."

"You mean we're gonna come out on the edge of a cliff?"

"Yes, Doctor, I believe that was what I said." Spock moved on ahead and McCoy glared at his retreating back before following in his wake. The last hundred metres seemed endless as they trudged doggedly on, McCoy tramping head down, keeping a wary eye on the tangled roots and hidden pitfalls, to be brought up sharply by Spock's restraining arm as they emerged from the forest. He straightened and caught his breath at the vast panorama spread before them; mile upon mile of open rolling country, studded with thickly wooded hills. A wide river meandered through the valley far below, and a muffled roaring gradually impinged on their consciousness. Moving forward carefully, they sank to their knees and lay full length on the very edge of the precipice, to peer over the top. The sight was breathtaking. The land fell sheer away, and far to their right, a magnificent waterfall, sparkling white in the sunshine, cascaded hundreds of feet to the river, providing the explanation for the roaring. At length Spock raised himself to a sitting position and unslung his tricorder to check the readings. He studied them, adjusted the dials, and regarded them intently. McCoy glanced across at him, noting his consternation. "Something wrong?"

"Wrong? No, not wrong - but it would appear that the sensor readings were inaccurate."

"In what way?"

"I am picking up readings of a metallic compound - certainly artificial - approximately 3.5 kilometres away, across the valley."

"So there is intelligent life on this planet after all?"

"Not necessarily. But there has certainly been sentient life here at some time, even if they were only on a survey, as we are. No Federation survey has been conducted in this system before, therefore an investigation is merited. I suggest we beam back to the ship and transport down to the appropriate location."

Having relayed the information, and themselves, back to the Enterprise, they stood waiting for the co-ordinates to be fed into the transporter.

"This can't be good for you," grumbled McCoy. "All this scrambling and re-scrambling of our molecules. Once is bad enough, but four times? It's just not natural!"

"Perhaps you would prefer to remain on the ship?"

The doctor glowered at Spock. "No, now I've come this far, I may as well complete the survey."

A raised eyebrow was his only answer, and he shrugged in resignation.

Rematerialisation found them in a clearing by the river. Checking tricorder readings, Spock started off towards a clump of trees about fifty metres distant, the others close on his heels. Partially hidden by broken branches and the ever-present creepers, was a ship, and they proceeded warily.

"Any sign of life?" murmured McCoy.

"Negative, Doctor," replied Spock in a normal speaking voice. "This vessel has been here for some considerable time. I would estimate somewhere in the region of five hundred years."

"Five hundred years!" McCoy whistled. "Where is it from? It doesn't look like any Federation vessel I've ever seen."

"No, it is certainly not a Federation ship. It does, however, look vaguely familiar."

They proceeded to clear away the foliage in order to get a better look at the craft. It was somewhat larger than one of their own shuttlecraft, and as more of it was gradually revealed, the configuration became increasingly familiar to all four of them - it bore an unmistakable resemblance to a Romulan scoutship!

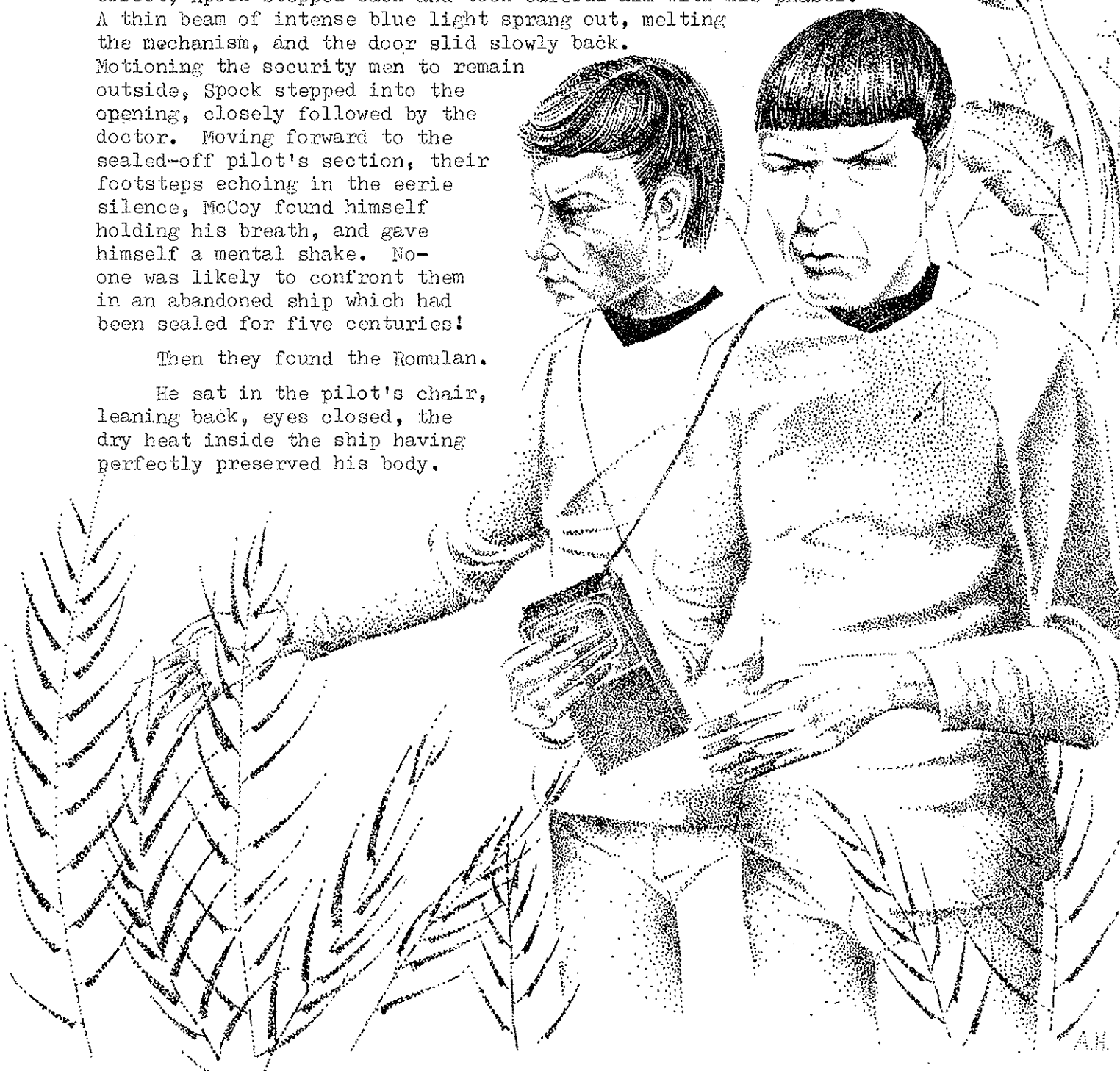
"Romulans! Wonder what they were doing this far from the Neutral Zone, even five hundred years ago?"

"Unknown, Doctor. Perhaps the ship's log will tell us something."

An attempt to operate the opening mechanism producing no effect, Apock stepped back and took careful aim with his phaser. A thin beam of intense blue light sprang out, melting the mechanism, and the door slid slowly back. Motioning the security men to remain outside, Spock stepped into the opening, closely followed by the doctor. Moving forward to the sealed-off pilot's section, their footsteps echoing in the eerie silence, McCoy found himself holding his breath, and gave himself a mental shake. No-one was likely to confront them in an abandoned ship which had been sealed for five centuries!

Then they found the Romulan.

He sat in the pilot's chair, leaning back, eyes closed, the dry heat inside the ship having perfectly preserved his body.



Reaching past him, Spock examined the instrumentation, locating the ship's log. Pressing it into the appropriate slot, he experimentally pressed the button. The viewing screen flickered into faint life. Evidently the power packs were almost expended, but after a few seconds, although the picture was still badly distorted, the sound was clearly audible. The face on the screen was obviously that of the dead man at the controls, and he appeared to be speaking with great difficulty.

"Despite all my efforts, the last one of the victims has now died. Seventeen men and women, in perfect physical health just three weeks ago, now lie buried on this strange world to which we were evacuated from the mother ship. Even now, as I myself have entered the terminal stage of the illness, I do not comprehend the exact nature of the virus. I have ascertained that it is a strain of the scarpoa virus, which in normal circumstances is relatively harmless, producing nothing more than a slight fever and irritation of the throat. Indeed, That is how this whole nightmare started. Examination of the first patient to report sick identified the scarpoa virus. Two or three days' treatment and rest, and he should have completely recovered. He didn't; on the fifth day the fever escalated, but at this stage we were not unduly worried, despite the fact that several more people had developed similar symptoms. On the eighth day, to our relief, the fever broke and the patient appeared well on the way to recovery. During the days which followed he experienced intermittent blurring of vision, and by the thirteenth day he was totally blind. Then his hearing gradually began to fade, and by the sixteenth day, he was dead.

Thus the pattern was set for almost one hundred people. Despite all we could do, every single one of them was dead within eighteen days of the initial symptoms appearing. At this stage, the virus had successfully been confined to sickbay, which was then sealed off from the rest of the ship. On being unable to formulate a cure, the eighteen of us still remaining in sickbay - largely medical and nursing staff - were ordered to evacuate the ship in order to arrest the spread of the disease. A somewhat harsh decision, but one with which we were all in full agreement. There was no other way.

I have made this report in order that it may be of some assistance, in the event of further investigations as to our plight being carried out by my people."

The tape wound slowly to a halt.

"Not very pretty, huh?" McCoy's voice sounded loud in the ensuing silence. "A nasty way to go, even for a Romulan."

"Indeed."

Something in the tone of the Vulcan's voice made McCoy regard him with concern. "Spock, are you all right?"

Spock gazed levelly at the doctor. "Of course, Dr. McCoy. Why should I not be?"

"I just thought you sounded... Never mind, forget it. We'd better get back to the ship."

"Yes. We have done all we can here." Spock leaned forward and extracted the tape.

"Do you think we ought to bury him?" McCoy nodded in the direction of the Romulan.

Spock sat silent for a long moment, gazing at the dead man, then nodded agreement. Together they carried him outside and laid him to rest.

PART TWO

"Your move, Spock." Kirk glanced across at his opponent as Spock made no move to reply. "Spock!"

The Vulcan glanced up quickly. "I'm sorry, Jim. Did you say something?"

"Yes, I did." Kirk examined him closely. "It's your move."

"I...apologise. I was a little...preoccupied."

"So I noticed. Is anything wrong?"

"No. No, nothing is wrong." Spock spoke a little too quickly for conviction and a warning bell tinkled at the back of Kirk's mind.

"Are you sure? I haven't seen much of you these past few days. In fact, I've hardly set eyes on you outside duty periods, since that survey on Almiridian."

"I assure you, Captain, there is nothing wrong." He leaned forward and made his move. "Checkmate, I think."

"What? Where did that come from?"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "You intimated that it was I who was not concentrating a moment ago."

"O.K., you win. As usual. Shall we start another game?"

Spock hesitated. "If you don't mind, I think I'd rather retire to my quarters. I am a little - tired."

"No, of course I don't mind. There's always tomorrow. Goodnight, Spock." He watched as the door closed behind his friend. Something was wrong, despite Spock's assurance to the contrary, and that vague sense of uneasiness returned.

Safely closeted in his own quarters, Spock leaned thankfully against the door and closed his eyes. He would have to be careful! He raised a shaking hand to his too hot forehead, and swallowed painfully. Fever and a sore throat! Surely coincidence. Nothing, even bacteria, could have survived without a host for five centuries! Somehow he couldn't quite convince himself of that, and he felt the cold hand of fear clutch at him. Coming to a sudden decision, he crossed to the intercom and summoned sickbay.

"Mr. Spock," came McCoy's cheery voice. "I was just about to call you. I'm all set up for your routine physical, so get yourself down here."

"I would prefer you to come to my quarters, Doctor. I need to talk to you ...privately."

McCoy sobered immediately. "I'll be right there."

He was as good as his word, and was standing outside Spock's door two minutes later, strangely reluctant to enter. Resolutely, he pressed the buzzer, to receive the customary 'Come'. The Vulcan sat at his desk, head in his hands, and McCoy studied him for several seconds before crossing to stand in front of him. "I've been expecting this call for days." His voice was low and tense. "Symptoms?"

"I...have a slight fever, headache...and it hurts to swallow."

McCoy took out his mediscanner and proceeded to pass it slowly over Spock's body. Finally he straightened and turned away.

"It is the scarpoa virus, isn't it?" Spock asked quietly.

The doctor swung to face him. "Maybe that's all it is. It's possible. After all these years it could have reverted back to its original form and be harmless."

Spock shook his head slowly, the faintest of smiles touching his lips. "You

don't believe that, Leonard, any more than I myself do."

"But it is possible! Well, isn't it?" He leaned forward and grasped the Vulcan's unresisting shoulders, gripping tightly. "Spock, isn't it?"

Spock closed his eyes against the open anguish in the doctor's and took a deep breath. "It is possible," he conceded.

Releasing his hold, McCoy moved to perch on the end on the desk. "It's been how long since we beamed back from that damned survey? Four, five days?"

"Today is the fifth day."

'On the fifth day, the fever escalated.'

The words echoed in both their minds as the two men locked gazes in mutual understanding. At length, McCoy spoke. "Does Jim know?"

A flash of pain crossed Spock's features, and he looked away. "No. And he must not. Not yet."

"But Spock, he has a right to know. Him more than anyone."

"Not yet! Please, Bones, you must promise me you won't mention this to him until absolutely necessary. As you pointed out, it may just be the simple scarpoa virus, and he would be worried needlessly. Please, promise me you won't tell him!"

The entreaty in Spock's voice cut through McCoy like a knife, and he laid a gentle hand on the Vulcan's shoulder. "All right, I promise. For the moment, I'll keep quiet, but if...if..."

"If it proves necessary, Doctor, I'll tell him myself."

McCoy nodded wordlessly, then with an abrupt change of manner he stood and crossed to the door. "Come on. I want you in sickbay. I need to take some blood and tissue samples. Medical science has come a long way in five hundred years, and even if it comes to the worst, maybe we can come up with an antidote."

Obediently, Spock rose and accompanied him to sickbay.

As Kirk chattered inconsequentially at breakfast next morning, his First Officer's absolute silence gradually filtered through to him, and he eyed him concernedly. "Spock, what's wrong? And don't say there nothing wrong again. You know you can't fool me." He looked searchingly into the too bright eyes, noting the rigid facial muscles, and reached out a hand to cover his friend's tightly clenched fist lightly. "Please, Spock, tell me."

Spock took a deep, shuddering breath and met Kirk's worried gaze. "I... think I ought to report sick, Capta in. Will you accompany me to sickbay?"

Kirk felt a faint chill, and that warning bell sounded again, a little louder this time. "Of course, Spock. Are you sure you can make it? You look terrible. Maybe I should call Bones..."

"That will not be necessary, Captain. I can walk."

Despite Spock's assurances, Kirk instinctively moved close to him and took his arm, half expecting him to move away, their being in full view of some twenty crewmembers having breakfast. When, however, the Vulcan gratefully accepted his help, Kirk felt his heart pound painfully and he was suddenly filled with dread. The feeling did not diminish on reaching sickbay, where McCoy did not seem at all surprised to see them. It was almost as if he had been expecting just this to happen. But that was ridiculous...wasn't it? Spock had been perfectly all right prior to this morning, he mused, as he paced back and forth in McCoy's office while the doctor examined his friend. He brought up sharply even as this thought formulated. Who was he trying to kid? Hadn't he himself been worried about Spock for days now? He stood stock still in the middle of the room, and considered. The Vulcan had been - preoccupied - ever since that survey on

Almiridian. There was nothing in the report to indicate anything untoward. An abandoned scoutship - a dead Romulan - both of which had lain there for five centuries. His musings were interrupted by McCoy's entrance.

"How is he, Bones? What's wrong with him?"

McCoy's tone was mildly placating. "Relax, Jim. It's just a virus he picked up. He'll be right as rain in a couple of days."

Kirk looked him straight in the eye. "Are you sure? Please, Bones, the truth. You're not keeping anything from me?"

"Why on earth should I do that? He has a virus infection, pretty common among Vulcans. It's no more dangerous than the common cold would be to you or me. Just makes you feel rotten for a couple of days. He'll be fine, you'll see."

McCoy mentally crossed his fingers, and sent up a silent prayer that that would prove to be the case. At any rate, Kirk seemed satisfied for the moment, and left for the bridge, after extracting a firm promise that he would be kept informed of Spock's condition. Re-entering the ward, McCoy stood quietly watching as Christine administered the prescribed drug for the scarpoa virus. He had, of necessity, had to acquaint her with the true facts of the case. It was a race against time if they were to succeed in finding an antidote, but he wished with all his heart that he could have kept her in ignorance. She was taking it very well, considering, but he knew that, deep inside, she was falling apart.

The fever raged with increasing violence for the next forty-eight hours, during which time the whole ship seemed to hold its breath. Then, as abruptly as it started, it abated, leaving Spock weak and exhausted, but otherwise, seemingly in good health. McCoy, somewhat reluctantly, released him from sickbay, coming to the conclusion that there was nothing to be gained by detaining him. Preliminary tests on the blood and tissue samples had indeed identified the scarpoa virus, and repeated dosages of the accepted antidote had failed to produce any noticeable effect. Neither, so far, had anything else they'd tried. As yet another possibility proved negative, McCoy swapt the equipment to the floor with a resounding crash, in sheer frustration, bringing Christine running.

He grinned wryly. "Sorry, Chris. I know I shouldn't have done that. It serves no useful purpose and I'll only have to set the whole damned thing up again. It's just that I feel so..."

"It's all right, Doctor, I understand." She gazed at him with pain-filled eyes. "It's not going to work, is it? There's nothing we can do."

He moved to her side comfortingly, to say, "Chris, don't give up hope yet. As long as he's still alive, there's hope. You've got to believe that."

"Do you?"

The stark misery in her voice effectively silenced him, and with a last reassuring squeeze on her shoulder, he commenced salvaging what was left of the shattered equipment.

Three days passed uneventfully, and McCoy and Christine slowly began to feel they could breathe again. Maybe they were going to be lucky after all, and the virus would remain largely inert. They still hadn't come up with anything to kill it, but on the other hand, it seemed pretty harmless. Spock went about his duties normally, and things slowly settled into the everyday working atmosphere of the ship.

Kirk settled comfortably back in the command chair and switched on the recorder.

"Captain's Log. Stardate 4318.7.

Having completed the survey of the planet Almiridian, we are now en

route for the second planet of the system. Our course heading at this time is..."

He glanced across at his First Officer.

"284 mark 78, sir."

"284 mark 78," continued Kirk. "E.T.A. - "

"Excuse me, sir," began Chekov hesitantly.

Kirk switched off the recorder and turned to face the young Russian. "Yes, Mr. Chekov?"

"Er...it's just that... It must be my fault, sir, but my figures do not agree with Mr. Spock's...sir."

Spock bent to his viewer. After a couple of seconds he straightened. "What heading do you have, Mr. Chekov?"

Blushing furiously, Chekov lowered his eyes to his board, and stammered, "I'm s...sorry, sir. I make it...264 mark 78."

The Vulcan clasped his hands behind his back and stared straight ahead. "Mr. Chekov is quite correct, Captain. The error is mine."

Those few quiet words had the effect of a photon torpedo suddenly exploding in their midst, as all eyes turned to Spock in frank disbelief. Kirk was the first to recover. "Never mind, Spock. We all make mistakes."

Even as he spoke the words, he recognised the utter futility of them. Spock did not make mistakes in calculation. Ever!

"Thank you, sir." Spock's voice was as emotionless as ever. "If I may be excused, sir, I have some work to attend to in the lab."

As he moved towards the elevator, Kirk's eyes followed him worriedly. Making his mind up fast, he rose from his seat, and with a quick turn over of command to Sulu, raced to the elevator, just making it through the closing doors. Spock acknowledged his presence with the raising of an eyebrow, but offered no comment on his precipitate arrival. They rode in silence to Deck 5, then with one accord proceeded in the direction of Spock's cabin. Once inside, Kirk rounded on him, fighting down a rising sense of panic.

"Spock, what the hell's going on? We both know you've never made a mathematical error in your life!"

Spock regarded him intently, as if seeing him for the first time, then, pressing his palms to his eyes, he shook his head slightly and sat on the edge of the desk. This in itself was so totally uncharacteristic that Kirk was temporarily thrown off balance, and just stood, waiting expectantly. When at last Spock started to speak, his words were so low that Kirk had to move closer to hear.

"There is something I...have to tell you. I had hoped this would prove unnecessary, but it seems that I have no choice. It is...difficult to find the right words, but I must try."

There was such a wealth of misery in the words that Kirk instinctively laid his hands on Spock's shoulders and said gently, "Come on, Spock. It can't be that bad. Just tell me what's wrong, and I'm sure we'll be able to work it out."

Spock shook his head. "No, Jim. Not this time, I'm afraid." He looked up to meet his friend's anxious gaze. "I'm sorry, my friend. There is no easy way to tell you what I must." He drew his breath in slowly. "Jim... I am dying."

Time seemed to stop as the two men locked gazes.

"You're... Spock, did I hear you correctly?"

"Yes, Jim, you did. I would give anything to spare you this, but McCoy was right. You, of all people, must know."

Kirk shook his head in bewilderment. "You...you can't be...dying! Why? How? Can't Bones do something?" He seized on that thought. "Bones! He knows about this? The other day when I took you to sickbay...he said there was nothing to worry about. He lied to me!"

Spock gripped Kirk's arms and shook him gently. "Jim, stop it! You're losing control! Please don't make this any more difficult, for both our sakes."

Kirk gazed at his friend in confusion, and swallowed convulsively. "I'm... sorry. But...I was so worried about you that day. I begged Bones to tell me the truth...and...he lied! He said you'd be fine."

"I know, Jim. I know. Don't blame McCoy. He was only carrying out my wishes. I made him promise not to tell you the truth."

"But why, Spock? And what truth? How long have you both known?"

Spock gently disengaged himself from Kirk's grasp and moved round the desk to sit in the chair. He leaned forward and regarded his friend over steeped fingers. "It started with the survey on Almiridian."

Kirk stiffened. "Almiridian? I knew there was something wrong on that survey at the time. I just knew."

Spock nodded. "In my report, I omitted to mention that we knew the cause of the Romulan's death." He reached into a drawer and passed a cassette over. "I recovered that tape from the Romulan vessel."

Kirk took it gingerly and stared at it, turning it over in his hands, before inserting it into the viewer on the desk top. "This can't be happening," he thought dazedly as that long dead Romulan voice calmly related the sequence of events leading to his own inevitable death. But one glance at the grave brown eyes of the Vulcan betrayed the fact that it was only too real. In a strange way he felt drained of all emotion, his senses numbed, as he ventured, "That... error...on the bridge. It was your eyes...blurring?"

Spock nodded wordlessly.

"But...that doesn't necessarily mean that you're...going to die! Anyone can experience blurred vision. It could be just coincidence."

"Jim, you are what I believe is referred to as 'clutching at straws'. It's just too many coincidences. Besides which, that was not the first time. And Jim...it's getting worse by the minute. In the short space of time that we have been in this room, the lighting appears to have dimmed considerably. We both have to face the fact that, this time, there is no way out. It is now fourteen days since I contracted the virus. If it runs true to form, as it appears to be doing, I have, at most, another four days."

"Four days," whispered Kirk. "Four days to come to terms with the fact that I'm...going to lose...my dearest friend. How...how do I do that?"

Spock reached out lightly to touch his arm. "You will, Jim, in time. You have friends who care about you. They will help."

Kirk looked up, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "Spock, isn't there any-thing that can be done? Would anyone on Vulcan be able to help?"

"I'm afraid not. This particular virus is a mutation of a relatively harmless one. Even Vulcan could not offer any advice without first running tests on it, and the Enterprise is eight days from Vulcan, even at maximum warp. Time is against us, my friend."

They lapsed into silence; a sombre, brooding silence, which both were loathe to break.

"Captain Kirk, to the bridge, please."

Kirk stared unseeingly towards the intercom from which Uhura's voice issued, but made no move to acknowledge, and Spock reached across to answer quietly, "Captain Kirk is on his way."

Rising to his feet, he moved round the desk and gripped Kirk's arm. "Jim, listen to me. You have a ship to run, despite anything that may be happening to me. You are needed on the bridge."

"To hell with the ship." Kirk's voice was bitter. "Do you really think I can go up there as though nothing has happened, after what you've just told me?"

"Yes, Jim, I do. You are, first and foremost, a Starfleet Officer, responsible for the lives of over four hundred people. You cannot, indeed I know you will not, let your concern for one individual, no matter how close to you, blind you to that fact. Go now. I have...things to attend to."

Kirk held his gaze for a long moment, then capitulated and drifted towards the door. With his hand on the release he looked back. "Will...will you be all right? I mean...shouldn't you go to sickbay? Maybe Bones..."

"No, that will not be necessary, just yet. I am in no pain, therefore require no medication. I would prefer to remain in my quarters."

Reluctantly, Kirk gave in and left, promising to return. With the closing of the door, Spock sank down onto the edge of the desk and clasped his hands together in an effort to still their trembling. Breathing deeply, he fought to control his chaotic emotions. The moment he had dreaded had passed; he had broken the tragic news to his friend. But it was by no means over yet, he fully realised. Doubtless Jim had hardly even taken it in yet, and the next four days were going to test their strength to the limit.

The days passed slowly, and Spock was ultimately ordered to sickbay as his sight further deteriorated. News had leaked out, as these things always do, and an atmosphere of sombre anticipation pervaded the entire ship, no-one quite sure what was happening save the fact that their Vulcan First Officer was gravely ill. Kirk could feel the pitying glances directed at him wherever he went, and at last felt compelled to hand command over to Scotty, lest he lose control completely; something he could not afford to do whilst Spock needed him.

On the morning of the third day, Christine approached Spock's room, and stopped just inside the doorway, her throat constricting painfully as she gazed at the man in the bed. Fleetinglly she wondered whether she ought to have taken Dr. McCoy's advice, and let another nurse attend him, but quashed the thought immediately. No matter how painful, she had to see this through. Whether he admitted it or not, Spock needed to have friends around him at this time, and although she didn't dare count herself as a friend, exactly, at least her presence was preferable to a stranger's...wasn't it?

"Nurse Chapel, have you come for a specific purpose, or are you just whiling away a few spare moments?"

Christine almost dropped the tray she was holding as she jumped involuntarily. Spock had not moved or even looked in her direction, yet that sixth sense of his had immediately detected both her presence and identity.

"Good morning, Mr. Spock. I've brought you some breakfast."

"Thank you, but I don't believe I want any."

Christine set the tray down on the bedside table. "You really ought to try to eat something, you know."

"Why?"

"Why?" she echoed uncertainly. "Well, because...you have to keep your strength up. Dr. McCoy's orders."

"Again, I repeat, why? I see no reason to conserve strength when, in all probability, my existence will terminate in the next twenty-four hours."

Christine drew back as if stung. "I...I'm sorry...I only wanted...I didn't mean... Oh, Lord, I'm sorry."

She turned away quickly, but Spock's hand shot out to grasp her wrist. "No, Christine. It is I who should apologise. That was...unnecessary. I am not usually prone to self-pity. Please forgive me."

Something about his eyes caught her attention, and she slowly reached out her free hand to pass it across his face. The pupils did not react at all, and Spock's other hand caught hers. "Yes, you are right. I am blind."

An involuntary sob escaped her, and she tried to pull away from his grasp, to no avail! He held her hands firmly, and started to speak, his voice holding a very gentle note he had never used with her before.

"Christine, I will not pretend that I do not know how you...feel about me. I have stated that emotions are alien to me, but a small number of people, yourself among them, know that to be false. I...realise how much the events of the past few days have distressed you, and I would like to say thank you, for 'staying on the case'. It would have been...difficult...to have had a strange nurse attend me at this stage."

Struggling to hold her emotions in check, Christine managed to whisper, "Thank you. I...had to do it...for my own sake."

Spock nodded in understanding, then began, hesitantly, "I could - if you permit - help you through this."

"Help me? What do you mean?"

"By using the mind meld, I could make you forget you ...emotional attachment to me. In that way, my death would not come as such a...automatic experience."

Christine stared at him for several seconds in silence, turning the thought over in her mind. Not to have to face the intolerable agony of losing him; only the normal regret of losing a crewmember; an end to this aching void in her heart. She felt a slight pressure on her wrist as his hand tightened its grip, and came to the only decision she could. "Thank you, Spock, but I can't let you do that. I...appreciate your motives, but...I don't want to forget you as easily as that. I...care about you, and I don't ever want to forget that. I'll survive...somehow." She squeezed the hand which still held hers, and gazed into his sightless eyes. "But you knew that, didn't you?"

"Yes, I knew," he answered softly, "but I had to make the offer." He released her hands and relaxed against the pillows. Hearing the outer door swish open, Christine stooped to retrieve the untouched tray, and moved towards the door.

"Good morning, Nurse Chapel," began Kirk, smiling. "How's the patient?"

She was not deceived by his teasing tone, and shook her head slowly, raising a hand to point to her eyes. "Good morning, Captain. I've been trying to persuade him to have some breakfast. Without success, I might add. I'll leave him in your hands now."

Kirk nodded. "Thanks, Chris. I'll stay here now."

"Christine."

They both turned towards the bed. "Yes, I'm here. Can I do anything?"

"No...thank you. I only wanted to say...goodbye...and thank you again for your...care."

Hardly trusting her own voice, she managed to murmur, "Goodbye, Mr. Spock." She felt the warm pressure of Kirk's fingers on her shoulder, and took a last long look at the man she loved so much, knowing without doubt that this was the last time, then quickly made her exit whilst she still retained some semblance of control. Kirk watched her go, his own control none too secure, then lowered himself onto the side of the bed.

"I'm...surprised...at the way Christine's taking all this. I thought she'd have broken long ago."

"As I believe I once said to you, Captain, she is a...remarkable woman."

Perhaps, under different circumstances, away from the confines of the ship, I could have..." He sighed. "No matter, that is all in the past now, and there is no future for me." He sensed more than heard Kirk's indrawn breath. "Jim, I'm sorry. There is no point in pretending otherwise. You and I both know that. We have to face it."

"Yes, I know. But Spock, I'm...not sure if I can. I've lived in dread of something like this for years; all the times you were ill before, or missing, part of me has always been with you, suffering with you, even dying with you. How do I go on without you?"

"You must! For myself, I do not fear death. Oh, I do not welcome it with open arms, but I can face what is to come quite calmly, if I can rest assured that you will be able to handle it."

Kirk's voice was ragged. "How? You've become so much a part of my life that the prospect of not having you with me is...unbearable."

"Jim, listen to me. Trust me. You do trust me, don't you?"

"With my life! You know that!"

"Then listen to me, and believe what I say. I will always be with you. We are bound together so closely, that even death will not separate us. Whenever you need me, I will be there to help."

"Oh, Spock. I'll always need you."

"Then I will always be with you. Believe that, and I beg of you, do not let your grief rule you. Let your friends help. Don't shut them out." After a brief silence, he changed the subject abruptly. "I take it Mr. Scott is in command?"

"What? ...Oh...yes...I thought it best. Everyone knows about your...illness, and...I just couldn't take it any more. They were all being so kind and compassionate...I had to get away from them before..." He took a deep, steadying breath. "And the bridge is so quiet. Uhura's heartbroken. She wanted to come to see you, but I wasn't sure how you'd feel about that. And poor Chekov. He's taken over the library computer, temporarily at least. Although he's stood in for you dozens of times before, when I asked him to...take your place two days ago, he just stared at me as if you were dead or something. I...had to explain the situation to the whole bridge crew...God, I still don't know how I made it. Chekov and Uhura didn't. That's...when I decided to hand over to Scotty. If I'd stayed on the bridge another minute...I'd have broken down too." He felt panic welling up in him again as the memory washed over him. "Oh God, why did I have to send you on that survey? An incurable Romulan...plague...and I send a Vulcan down! I sent you to your death!"

Spock reached up and grasped Kirk's arms hard. "No, Jim! That's not true! You had no way of knowing what lay on that planet, any more than I had. It was just...unfortunate, that I was the one to find the Romulan ship."

"Unfortunate! You have only...hours...to live, and you say it's...unfortunate! Oh, Spock, Spock, how can you be so..." His voice broke, and the tears at last spilled over, his body trembling with racking sobs as long days of sleeplessness, tension and shock finally took their toll. Wordlessly, Spock pulled him gently into his arms and held him close, tears in his own dark eyes at the thought of the pain and suffering he was unavoidably inflicting on this man who was closer to him than any brother could ever be. He stroked his hair tenderly as the racking sobs continued unabated; till at long last, completely spent, Kirk lapsed into an uneasy sleep of utter exhaustion.

Consciousness returned slowly, and Kirk was momentarily confused to find himself held in strong, gentle arms. But only momentarily, as full realization came flooding back. Struggling upright, he looked down at the Vulcan, who gazed back with unseeing eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, but Spock forestalled him

with a raised hand held in the mind-meld position. Horror-stricken, understanding flooded Kirk as he gripped the hand and guided it to his temple.

/Thank you, Jim. This is now the only means of communication open to us. Both my sight and hearing are gone./

/Oh, Spock. I'm sorry. If only there was something I could do./

/You are here. That is enough. I fear that time is running short, and there is still so much to say./

/How...how long?/

/Be brave, Jim. A matter of minutes only./

/What will I do? My life is meaningless without you./

/Life is never meaningless, my friend. You are young. You will accept, in time. Please, Jim, remember what I have told you. You are not going to lose me completely. I will always be with you, at your side. The bond between us is indestructible, even by death./

/I'll try, I promise. I'll try...for your sake./

/Not just for my sake, but for your own sake too, and for the sake of your friends, especially...Bones. Now, you must go, for I fear the end is near. You must break the link in time or you will be drawn in with me./

/Oh, Spock, that's a tempting thought. It would be so easy.../

/No, Jim! Do not even think that way! We will be together in time, but not yet. You must live your own life. Promise me!/

/It's all right, Spock, I promise...I'll withdraw. But...I just want you to know... Spock, I love you./

/I know...as you must know, that you are the brother I never had. Jim, my friend, my brother, you must withdraw. Now! Before it is too late./

/Spock...I... Goodbye./

Kirk lifted Spock's fingers from his face, breaking the link, and gathered him into his arms where Spock clung to him for a few, all too brief, seconds. A deep sigh escaped the Vulcan's lips as his body went limp, and Kirk held him close, the tears running unchecked down his face. Feeling a light touch on his arm, he looked up into McCoy's tear-bright eyes.

"Bones...he's...he's..."

"I know, Jim. I've...been here a few minutes. I...didn't want to intrude. Jim - I'm so sorry. I only wish there was something - anything - I could have done."

"Don't blame yourself, Bones. He didn't. As he pointed out a few minutes ago - none of us could have foreseen what awaited us on Almiridian." He leaned forward and laid his burden gently against the pillows, laying a hand against the already cooling cheek. Suddenly he had to get away - be alone for a while. With a muffled apology to the doctor he rose and almost ran from the room.

McCoy watched him go, his blue eyes reflecting the wrenching pain in his heart, then slowly took his place on the side of the bed. He reached out a tentative hand to touch the still face, feeling the tears rolling down his cheeks as he whispered, "That damned green blood of yours was your downfall in the end, wasn't it? I'm...gonna miss you, Spock. I did care...but I'm sure you knew that. You sure knew everything else." He absently traced a finger along an arched eyebrow, and trailed it down a pointed ear. A sob escaped his aching throat as he murmured, "Goodbye...my friend."

An immaculately uniformed Captain James T. Kirk stood waiting apprehensively as Scotty handled the controls of the transporter. The sparkling column of light

slowly solidified into the familiar shapes of Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan and his wife Amanda, and Kirk stepped forward, exchanging the customary Vulcan salute and greeting. Sarek regarded him gravely.

"Captain Kirk. I wish to thank you for returning Spock to his home."

Kirk bowed his head in acknowledgement. "There is no need for thanks, Ambassador. I know...Spock...would have wished it."

The momentary hesitation before Kirk uttered his son's name was not lost on Sarek, and he found himself wishing that he could somehow find the right words of comfort to say to Spock's closest friend. He looked to his wife, a silent message passing between them, then addressed Kirk again. "Captain, perhaps you will look after my wife whilst Mr. Scott takes me to my son."

"Yes...yes, of course, sir," murmured Kirk, motioning Scotty forward. The two men exited, leaving Kirk alone with Spock's mother. Taking a deep, steady-breath, he began. "I'm...so sorry. We did...all we could...but..."

Amanda stepped forward and took his hands in hers. "Please, Jim, don't. You don't need to apologise. Sarek and I both realise what you and our son...meant to each other. Just answer me one question, if you will."

Kirk looked up into eyes clouded with pain and deep sorrow. "Anything."

"Spock...didn't die...alone, did he?"

He clasped her hands firmly. "No, Lady Amanda, he didn't. He...died in my arms."

For the first time since the tragic news had been broken to her, Amanda's eyes filled with tears as she whispered, "Thank God. I've hoped and prayed that it would be so. Thank you, Jim. I...could not have wished him in better hands, for you were closer to him than even...I."

As Kirk fought a losing battle with his emotions, Amanda slipped her arms around his trembling body and gently drew his head down to her shoulder, holding him as she had so many times wished to hold her son, gaining comfort herself from this close contact with the man Spock had looked on as his brother.

If anyone had asked Jim Kirk afterwards how a Vulcan funeral ceremony was conducted, he would have been at a total loss. Sounds and images coalesced in his mind and he was left with vague impressions, insubstantial, like a dream, only partially remembered. At some point in the proceedings he was acutely aware of T'Pol's presence, but even her words failed to pierce the armour he had unconsciously built around his heart. Events long past flooded his mind. His first meeting with the austere, forbidding Vulcan; his own determination to break through the barrier between them to reach the lonely being hidden behind the iron mask; the first, tentative steps towards the friendship which was - had been - a legend in Starfleet. Key incidents came unbidden to mind. Spock's help and understanding after Edith's death; his unconcealed joy at the revelation that he had not in fact killed his Captain during the combat brought about by T'Pol's challenge. Spock's unwavering support when the transporter malfunction had split his personality into two conflicting halves - when Janice Lester had taken over his body - when the M5 computer had taken over his ship. So many times, uncountable, when the Vulcan's presence at his side had been essential to his very existence. Now he was alone, and the future stretched before him...bleak...frightening...long, long years without...

"Jim! For heaven's sake snap out of it! Jim!"

With a supreme effort Kirk managed to recall himself to the present as McCoy shook his arm and gazed at him worriedly. He looked about him in startled bewilderment, to find that the two of them, together with Spock's parents, were the only people still lingering at the burial spot. His tongue felt thick as he

managed to say, "I...it's all right, Bones. Don't worry. I'm all right."

Far from convinced, the doctor nodded and, gripping Kirk's arm tightly, steered him towards the waiting aircar. Sarek and Amanda followed, slowly, without a backward glance.

The journey back to Sarek's home was conducted in silence, broken as they arrived by the bleeping of Kirk's communicator. With a murmured apology he flipped it open. "Yes, Scotty, what is it?"

His Chief Engineer was apologetic. "I'm sorry, Captain. I waited as long as I dared, until I could be sure that...the ceremony would be concluded. I... haven't interrupted anything, have I?"

"No, Scotty. It's all right...it's...all over now." The pain in his voice reached out over the miles that stretched between them, causing tears of empathy to spring to the eyes of his officers on the bridge. "What's the problem?"

Swallowing the lump that had risen in his throat, Scotty made his report. "We've just received a distress call from Pollux 6, sir. They claim that they're under attack from Klingons and request immediate help, sir."

"Klingons! All right, get ready to break orbit and alert the transporter room, Give me a couple of minutes."

"Of course, sir. I...really am sorry I have to..."

"It's O.K., Scotty. It's not your fault. Prepare to beam us up on my signal. Kirk out." He looked apologetically at Sarek. "It seems that it is time to say goodbye. I...thank you for allowing us to be here...at this time." He held out a hand towards his friend's father. Sarek paused momentarily, then took the proffered hand, drawing the younger man towards him. Yielding to a sudden impulse, he gripped his arms and held him close for a brief instant, before holding him at arm's length, to say quietly,

"James...you were truly a brother to Spock. I...thank you for that, and honour his choice."

Kirk bowed his head. "Thank you, sir. It was...an honour for me, to have won your son's friendship."

The Vulcan turned to the doctor, holding out a hand which McCoy grasped firmly. "Dr. McCoy. My son regarded you as the closest of friends, and I thank you also for making his life so much easier."

He stepped aside, allowing his wife to move forward and quickly embrace both men. As she rejoined her husband, Sarek raised his hand in the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Captain Kirk, Dr. McCoy. Please feel free to visit us at any time."

"Thank you, sir," Kirk replied in a choked voice, then flipped open his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. You can beam us up now, Scotty."

Amanda stood close to her husband as the two men dissolved in the sparkle of the transporter beam, and whispered softly, "Goodbye, my son."

McCoy watched anxiously as Kirk made no move to descend from the platform. The thing he had feared most this interminable day was now happening, and he felt so helpless, unsure what to do or say to ease the pain he knew his friend was now feeling. He understood only too well what was rooting James Kirk to the spot, for he had himself felt a similar pang on rematerialisation. Only now was the full realisation of what had transpired making itself felt, as, for the first time, they had beamed back to the Enterprise without her Vulcan First Officer. Kirk raised agonised eyes to look pleadingly at his two senior officers.

"Bones...Scotty... I...I'm sorry... I can't..."

They were there in an instant, one either side of him, gently supporting as he stepped down. Over his bowed head, Scotty looked a question to his friend, who nodded in reassurance, and together they helped their Captain to the turbo-lift, travelling in silence to their destination. Once inside Kirk's cabin, McCoy gently eased him into a chair and regarded him with concern. He sighed in relief as the dazed look disappeared from Kirk's eyes and he slowly took in his surroundings, his eyes coming to rest at last on his two friends. "I'm...sorry. I'm all right now...really. I'm...not quite sure...what..."

"Jim," interrupted the doctor compassionately. "We understand. There's no need to apologise. I've...been anticipating something of the sort since we left the ship earlier today. Just now, materialising in the transporter room, it suddenly hit you that this is the way it's going to be from now on. That was the first time you've ever beamed back to the ship without Spock either being with you, or waiting for you when you arrived."

Kirk nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving those compassionate blue ones. "Yes, Bones, that's exactly how I felt. You did too, didn't you?"

"Yes, Jim, I felt it too. I think we all did."

Kirk slowly drew himself erect, and smiled for the first time since his friend's death. "I'm all right now. I'll be fine. Thank you both."

The two men smiled back and moved towards the door.

"Aye... Well, I'll be gettin' back to the bridge, sir."

"Thanks, Scotty. I'll be there myself shortly."

Scotty's voice was a little gruff as he ventured, "There's nae need tae hurry, Captain. Tak' yer time. I'll look after things for ye, until..." His voice tailed off at Kirk's sad, understanding smile, and he left for the bridge hurriedly, McCoy following only to turn back at the door.

"I'll be back in a minute, Jim."

Kirk threw a puzzled glance after the doctor as the door swished closed behind him, wondering at the hint of...embarrassment?...which had tinged his friend's voice. He was not left to ponder for very long, as, almost to the minute, McCoy re-entered, a small box in his hand. He fingered it for a moment, composing himself, before he looked up to meet Kirk's quizzical gaze.

"Jim...I...don't quite know what to say, right now...but...I promised...so here goes. The night before...Spock died, he entrusted this box to me and asked me to give it to you when we beamed back from Vulcan." He held out the box and a pang shot through him at the sudden pain in Kirk's eyes and his instinctive withdrawal. He reached out and took Kirk's hand, pressing the box into it, then turned to leave.

"No, Bones! Please...don't go."

He turned back. "Are you sure, Jim? Wouldn't you rather be alone?"

Kirk shook his head. "No, Bones. It's...always been the three of us. Please...stay."

Not trusting himself to answer, McCoy hitched himself onto the edge of the desk and watched as Kirk fumblingly lifted the lid of the box to display its contents. He drew in a long slow breath and murmured softly, "So that's where it was."

With trembling fingers, Kirk gently lifted out Spock's IDIC. Silent tears welled over, to run unheeded down his cheeks as he lifted the medallion in both hands and held it against his chest, his head bent over his clasped hands. McCoy, his own eyes brimming and his throat aching, leaned forward and put his arms round him, holding him comfortingly.

At length, Kirk disengaged himself, a little self-consciously, from his friend's embrace, and brushed a hand across his eyes. He looked up, smiling

tremulously. "Bones...I know I seem to be repeating myself a lot lately, but I really will be all right now. I promise...it was just..."

"I know, Jim, I know. The 'straw that broke the camel's back'. I did wonder what had happened to it. Sarek must have known what Spock intended doing. He never mentioned the IDIC at all."

Kirk nodded, fingering the upraised stone. Determinedly he smoothed out the chain and lifted it over his head, letting the IDIC fall onto his chest. The gentle pressure was somehow comforting, filling him with much needed strength, and he smiled up at his friend. "Thank you, Bones - from both of us."

Returning the smile, McCoy relaxed with the knowledge that Jim would be all right now. For a while there he'd been seriously worried that he wasn't going to make it; that Spock's death had broken him completely. His mind flashed back to the night - was it really only six days ago? - when Spock had given him the small box, with the request that he give it to Jim after they had returned from the funeral. He'd wondered at the delay, and had asked Spock the reason. Spock's reply would remain forever with him.

That is the time when he will need help most, which is why I ask you, Bones, to give this to him.

Yes, Spock had understood Jim perfectly, could anticipate his reactions, and so had arranged things accordingly. *You know, Spock,* McCoy thought wryly, *you'd have made a great psychiatrist.* He felt a light touch on his arm and dragged himself back to the present, returning Kirk's wistful smile. "Well, Jim, it's just the two of us now. Think we'll be able to muddle along together?"

"We'll managed, Bones," Kirk answered softly, "and you're wrong, you know. It's not just the two of us. He's still here. Don't you feel it?"

McCoy shook his head, instinctively glancing round the room. "Sorry, Jim, I can say I do."

Kirk squeezed his arm and smiled. "Never mind. Just take my word for it. Believe me, he's here."

Feeling a little...not worried, exactly, more perturbed...McCoy got to his feet. He opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it and moved to the door. As it swished open, he looked back. "You know where to find me... if you need me."

"Yes, Bones, I know. Thank you."

Alone in his room, Kirk settled back in his chair, eyes closed, and took several deep breaths before leaning forward to press the intercom button decisively. "Kirk to bridge."

"Yes, Captain, Bridge here."

"Mr. Scott, please send Mr. Sulu and Lt. Uhura to my quarters as soon as possible."

"Aye, sir, right away."

"Thanks, Scotty. Kirk out."

Resting his elbows on the desk, he cupped his chin thoughtfully, contemplating the coming interview, feeling reasonably certain of the outcome. His thoughts were interrupted by the door buzzer. "Come in."

The door slid open to admit the two officers, a little hesitant at first but visibly relaxing as their Captain smiled a welcome and bade them sit down. He regarded them over steepled fingers, causing Uhura's heart to miss a beat, as she registered this unconscious imitation of Spock's usual lecturing pose.

"I...realise that what I am about to say, may be...distressing...to all of us. But facts have to be faced." He inhaled deeply. "The Enterprise...I... need a First Officer. I know that, under normal circumstances, personnel replacements of this nature would be handled by Starfleet. But in this instance,

I know you will both appreciate that I could not envisage a stranger's taking over... Spock's duties." The flash of pain which crossed the faces of his two young companions did not escape his notice, and he paused fractionally to enable them to regain their composure before continuing. "Both of you are equally qualified to assume the position of First Officer, and I need hardly say that I would welcome either of you as such, which makes my decision...difficult."

As if on cue, Uhura spoke up, as he had known she would. "Sir, I can make the decision for you, if you will allow. In any other situation, I would be only too willing to take up the position of First Officer, but...not like this. I'm sorry, but I really don't think I could step into..." She broke off, catching her breath painfully.

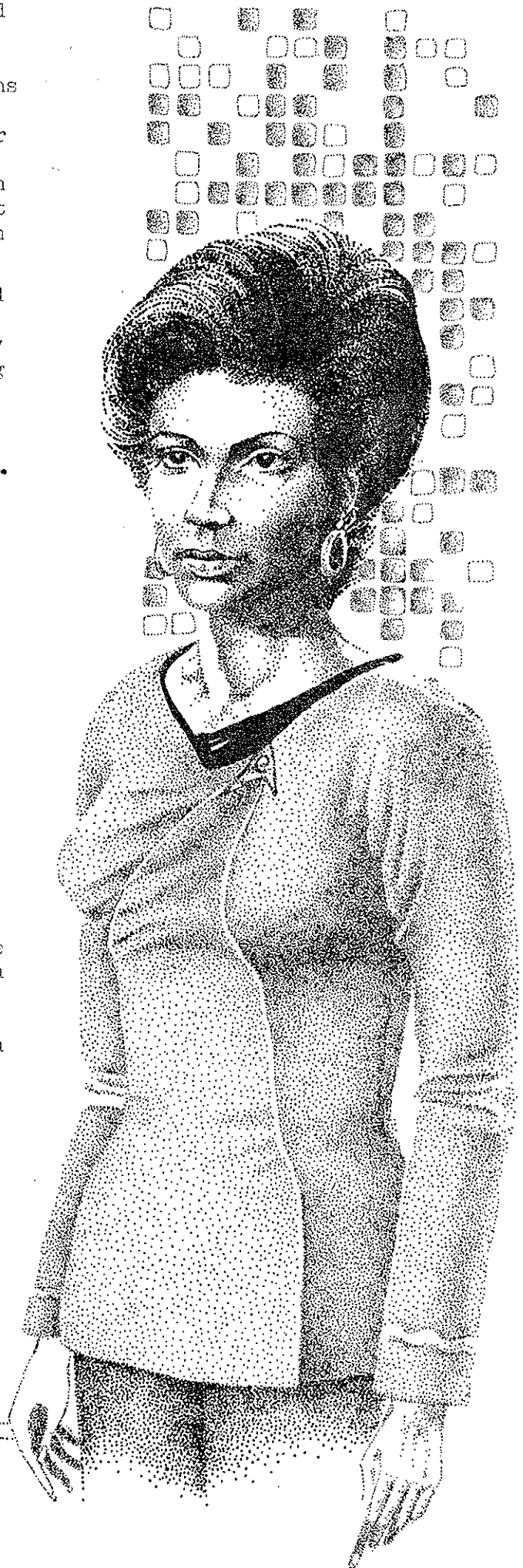
"Thank you, Uhura. I...suspected... you might feel that way. Mr. Sulu?"

Sulu started, switching his gaze from Uhura to the Captain. If the truth were told, he had similar qualms himself, but one look at Kirk's drawn features and haunted eyes made the decision for him. "I...would be honoured to accept, sir. Thank you, sir."

Kirk let out his breath in a sigh of blessed relief, having got that particular hurdle crossed safely. He got to his feet. "Thank you both for making this...difficult task a little easier. I appreciate how distressing the thought of stepping into Spock's shoes must be - to both of you. I did foresee that you would not feel able to accept, Uhura, and I do understand, believe me. And I can only say a grateful thank you to you, Sulu, for fighting your initial inclination to do likewise." He smiled at Sulu's confusion. "Relax, Sulu. Surely you realise that I know how you feel...how we all feel." Stepping around the desk, he dropped a casual arm around each shoulder. "And now, if you'll both excuse me, I think it's time I got out of this dress uniform and back to work."

At the door, Uhura turned to face him, her eyes dropping to the IDIC hanging around his neck. "Sir...I...I..."

Kirk laid gentle fingers against her lips. "I know."



Impulsively, she grasped his hand, holding it to her cheek for an instant, then fled after Sulu, leaving Kirk smiling after her.

Turning back into the room, he leaned thankfully against the bulkhead, lifting a hand to unfasten his dress tunic. He wandered slowly across the room and, with his free hand, idly picked up the bok still lying on the corner of his desk.

That small action stopped him in his tracks.

The box was not, as he had thought, empty, and he looked inside, a puzzled frown creasing his brow. He froze as his eyes fell on the cassette tape. Now where... It certainly hadn't been there before, of that he felt sure. He cast his mind back to that earlier scene, comprehension dawning. Bones - of course! He must have slipped it in whilst he himself had been...temporarily overcome. He sank into his chair, heart thudding painfully as he clutched the tape. It could only be one thing...but why now? Why like this? Slowly, his hand shaking, he reached across and pressed the tape into the viewer on his desk. The small screen lit up to reveal the calm, serene face of the man who had meant more to him than any brother.

"Jim - I purposely left this tape with Bones, to be given to you after my funeral, as I felt that only then would you really believe that what we had both feared over the years had actually happened, and I wanted to...help you to accept.

My friend, I know how you must be feeling at this moment, for I know what I would feel were our positions reversed. I hope that what I am about to say may ease the pain a little. I want to say thank you, Jim, for bringing meaning into my life. You brought an end to my long years of loneliness, and taught me the meaning of the word love. When I was a child, I longed for a brother, someone to share the loneliness my dual heritage forced upon me. You became that brother. The years we spent together on the Enterprise were the most wonderful of my life.

I do not wish to think of you shutting yourself away somewhere, grieving for me. Grief is, I know, a natural reaction to a loved one's death, but I beg of you, do not let it become your master. You are young, you have friends...especially Bones. He is a good friend, Jim. We have had altercations in the past, indeed, I cannot remember a time when we were not 'at each other's throats'. But I'm sure he knows that I really did care; at least, I hope so.

There is just one thing which, I hope, will not distress you unduly. Indeed, I pray that you will find it a comfort. The bond that held us so securely together in life cannot be entirely severed, even by death. My physical being is at an end, but that which you call the spirit, the soul, will remain at your side, always.

Jim, my dearest friend, my brother; I'm sure you know this, but I feel I have to say it this one time... I love you."

Kirk sat, staring unseeingly at the empty screen, for long moments, a wave of infinite tenderness washing over him. His vision blurred and he brushed a hand across his face, a smile of absolute joy spreading across his face. "Thank you, my friend," he whispered, "for confirming what I've always known to be true. Oh, Spock...I love you."

Gradually, the heartache and tension of the last few days filtered away. He straightened in his seat, and with firm, controlled movements, extracted the tape and locked it safely away.

Ten minutes later, he stepped onto the bridge, new life infusing his whole body. He could even look across to the science console, manned by Chakov, without that dreadful sinking feeling in his stomach. Almost.

Seating himself in the command chair relinquished by Scotty at his approach, his eyes perused the bridge, drinking in the familiar faces around him. As if to complete the picture, the elevator doors swished open, depositing McCoy, who cast a critical eye over him, then smiled, satisfied.

"Right, gentlemen, let's go sort out those Klingons! Do we have any more information, Scotty?"

Scotty looked worried. "No, Captain. Just that one distress call, then nothin'. I dinna like it, sir. We canna raise Pollux 6 at all."

"Pollux 6," mused Kirk. He swung to face Chekov. "What do we have on that planet, Mr. Chekov?"

Having anticipated the Captain's request, Chekov had all the relevant information at his fingertips. "Class M planet, sir; very unstable and inhospitable. No native inhabitants. It is used as a research station from time to time. According to records, the last group left three months ago."

"Hmm. I agree, Scotty. It doesn't sound good. A trap, do you think?"

"Could well be, sir. We know what Klingons are!"

"Ye-es. On the other hand, we can't just ignore it. We'll have to take the chance. How long before we reach Pollux 6?"

"Three point four hours, sir, at present speed."

"Which is?"

"Warp four, sir."

"Very well, Maintain."

The image on the viewscreen was not very encouraging. Dense cloud obscured most of the planet's surface, and what could be seen was a dull red-brown.

"Any life forms, Mr. Chekov?"

The Ensign looked up from his viewer. "Difficult to say, Captain. The planet is largely volcanic and highly unstable, creating a strong magnetic field which is confusing the sensors."

"Can you pinpoint the research station?"

"I think so, sir. The co-ordinates are logged in the computer banks. We should be able to beam down to within a few metres."

"Right, Mr. Chekov, you come with me. Sulu, you have the con."

Entering the transporter room, Kirk was not entirely surprised to find McCoy ready and waiting. "Bones, what are you doing here? We don't even know what's down there yet."

"All the more reason why I ought to come along," He dropped the bantering tone abruptly and drew Kirk aside. "Please, Jim, I have to go with you. I just couldn't rest, knowing you were down there...alone."

Kirk refrained from pointing out that taking Chekov and a couple of security guards hardly constituted going alone. He knew exactly what his friend meant. "All right, Bones, you win. Let's go."

They materialised on a slight slope overlooking the sprawling buildings of the research station. Cheking his tricorder, Chekov observed, "The readings are still confused, Captain, but I'm picking up life forms in the vicinity of the complex."

"Right, gentlemen, proceed with caution, phasers on stun."

Picking their way carefully down the rock-strewn hillside and keeping a wary eye open for any sign of movement, the party slowly approached the first

of the buildings, and Kirk held up a hand, looking about him. "Bones, you come with me. Chekov, take Adams and Bernardi, and check the other buildings."

"Aye, sir." The three moved off and Kirk set out in the opposite direction, McCoy close on his heels. A search of the nearest buildings revealed nothing; they proceeded carefully to the main complex. Phaser at the ready, Kirk opened the door and entered. There was an instant of blinding light, then complete and utter blackness descended on the two Starfleet officers.

Kirk groaned and raised a hand to his throbbing head.

"Ah, the Sleeping Beauty awakens."

The mocking tones banished all thought of pain, and Kirk dragged himself to a sitting position to glare at his assailants.

"Greetings, Captain Kirk. No tame Vulcan with you this time, I see,"

Ignoring the taunt, Kirk surveyed the four Klingons standing over him, weapons trained on him and his unconscious companion. "Karath!" He almost spat out the name. "I suppose it was you who sent out the distress signal."

"But of course. It was an opportunity I could not possibly pass over. At last, the chance to rid the Empire of its most troublesome Federation Captain."

"How? How could you possibly have known that it would be the Enterprise that would answer the distress call?"

"My dear Kirk, do you think I would have gone to all this trouble just on the off chance? Allow me to explain."

"Please do," Kirk invited drily. "I'm all ears."

Karath raised an eyebrow. "A description that would have suited your Vulcan friend ideally. A pity he was not with you. I was hoping to 'kill two birds with one stone'. No matter. There will be time later to deal with him."

"Just get to the point!" snapped Kirk, the Klingon's taunts aggravating the still open wounds.

"Ah yes, the point." He smiled venomously. "We have...acquired...a revolutionary new cloaking device. Where from need not concern you; suffice to say that we now have it, and were employed in testing it within Federation space. It works admirably. Not even the sophisticated tracking systems of Vulcan Space Central were able to detect us! But we were able to detect a Starship in orbit around Vulcan. Not just any Starship, but none other than the famed Enterprise. As I said, too good an opportunity to miss. The rest you know. It was fortunate, indeed, that this particular planet was in easy range of Vulcan. The magnetic field will serve to confuse the instruments on your ship sufficiently to mask our presence here. And now, Captain James T. Kirk, I fear it is time for us to say goodbye."

Kirk reached out a protective hand to the still form of the doctor, recognising the utter helplessness of his position, hoping fervently that Chekov and the others had not been discovered. Karath raised his disruptor, and Kirk stiffened in anticipation. Slowly, deliberately, the Klingon lowered the weapon till it was pointing directly at the Human's legs and fired. Frank disbelief showed on Kirk's face. He had heard the whine of the weapon, but had felt - nothing.

"What the hell..." He lunged forward to the sound of harsh laughter. Then he understood. He couldn't move! The lower half of his body was completely paralysed, and he stared at the weapon incredulously.

Dangling the instrument from his fingers, the Klingon laughed again. "Amusing little toy, don't you think?"

"What the hell are you playing at? Why don't you just kill us?"

"Playing, Captain? Oh, I assure you, I never play. No, I have something much more appropriate in store for you. You will go with a 'bang', I promise you!" He laughed at his own joke, and motioned his companions to retreat. "You see, Captain, this whole building is set to explode in exactly one minute. Much more spectacular, don't you agree? And no-one will ever know exactly what happened because there will be no trace of our ever having been here. Now I really must say goodbye; it would be most regrettable to be caught in my own trap. Goodbye, Captain Kirk."

The Klingons vanished in the sparkle of their transporter beam, and Kirk gazed at the empty space bemusedly. How long? Twenty - thirty seconds? It no longer seemed to matter. McCoy stirred, and Kirk felt a momentary pang that the doctor was to share his fate. A slight sound to his right alerted him to the danger. "Chekov, get out!"

"Sir?"

"Get out! This whole building's going to go at any second! Get the hell out of here, and tell Scotty the Klingons arranged all this. It's a trap!"

Chekov hesitated. "Sir, I can't just leave you and Dr. McCoy."

"Mr. Chekov, for the last time, I'm ordering you..."

The order never came as, with a deafening roar, the building collapsed like a pack of cards, burying Kirk and McCoy under a vast mountain of rubble.

"Jim!" McCoy's voice was hoarse. He felt about in the darkness till his hand encountered the unmoving body of his friend. With frantic fingers he sought for, and found, the pulse in his neck, weak but definitely there, and felt relief wash over him. Moving carefully, he attempted to determine the extent of Kirk's injuries, his initial relief rapidly changing to acute dismay. A heavy beam lay across his legs, one of which was obviously broken, and further investigation revealed that his outflung arms were pinned under a heap of rubble. His gently probing fingers came away wet from a deep gash across the unconscious man's forehead, and he sat back on his heels to consider the situation. He could remember very little of what had occurred. He remembered walking into the building, then his mind was a blank until he had recovered consciousness a few minutes ago. No, not quite a blank. He had vague recollections of Kirk shouting to Chekov to get out - something about a Klingon trap - then the whole world had seemed to explode. Miraculously, he himself was uninjured, apart from a few cuts and bruises, and he prayed fervently that Chekov had managed to get out in time. Jim couldn't possibly survive for long under these conditions, the superficial injuries alone being sufficient to cause him to bleed slowly to death. God alone knew what was happening inside him. He felt about him for his medikit, cursing aloud when he failed to locate it.

"Bones...Bones, where are you?"

McCoy bent quickly to catch the whispered words. "Easy, Jim, I'm here. Don't try to move."

Kirk drew in breath painfully. "Scotty was right. It...was a trap...and we...walked right into it."

"Jim, please just lie still. I don't know how badly injured you are. I can't see a blessed thing, so I can only work by touch. Is the pain bad?"

He felt Kirk's head nod slightly under his hand. "My...my arms...feel like they're on fire...and...it hurts...to breathe."

Inching forward, McCoy tried to move some of the debris from his arms, with little success, the slightest movement causing Kirk to cry out with the pain, till he was forced to abandon the attempt. He sat by his friend's side, laying a comforting arm across his shoulders. "Hold on, Jim. Maybe Chekov got away in time. He'll alert Scotty and they'll soon have us out of here."

He noted with trepidation that Kirk had lapsed into unconsciousness again, his breathing harsh and erratic, and he reached out a hand to lay it on his brow. The skin felt hot and dry, and McCoy struggled to control his seething emotions.

"Oh, Jim," he whispered brokenly, "I'm sorry...there's nothing I can do. Hold on...please, hold on! They'll find us...they've got to find us!"

He settled himself as comfortably as possible and resigned himself to a long frustrating wait. The minutes stretched into hours, and he roused himself from an uneasy doze to check his patient as best he could. A swift examination filled him with consternation. It wasn't possible! Shifting position slightly, he made a more detailed check, as far as circumstances permitted. His first conclusion was confirmed! The rapid, harsh breathing which had so alarmed him earlier had eased perceptibly; and the hot, dry skin of Jim's forehead had cooled considerably. Wonderingly, he laid his fingers against the pulse in his neck. It was still weak, but there was a definite improvement. He sat back on his heels. What was happening here? He felt a thrill of fear...fear of the unknown...and peered into the all-enveloping darkness, as if seeking the answer there. There was no way in which the improvement in Jim's condition could have occurred without medication of some kind, some outside force...unless... His breath caught in his throat as a thought occurred to him, a thought, at first, so fantastic, so unbelievable, that he almost dismissed it out of hand. But somehow the thought persisted, and he forced himself to consider it seriously. Jim had believed. Was it really so impossible? Hesitantly, he whispered, "Spock?"

He hadn't really expected an answer, but for a fleeting instant, he could have sworn there was someone at his shoulder. Automatically he swung round, reaching out a hand into the blackness...nothing. He sighed and shook his head, turning back to Jim. He stroked his hair gently, and by slow degrees a strange sense of well-being washed over him. Slowly the conviction grew that everything was going to be all right, and he murmured, "I don't know how, Jim, but...I think...you were right. He is here. I think...we're going to come out of this, Jim."

Kirk stirred and McCoy bent to hear the whispered words, "Thanks, Spock."

The doctor closed his eyes against sudden tears. Of course, Jim could have just been answering him, Spock's name slipping out unconsciously, but deep inside McCoy knew without doubt that that was not so. There could be no other possible explanation for Jim's renewed hold on life, and McCoy rejoiced with him, relaxing in the knowledge that Jim was safe. He settled back to wait.

Time passed slowly.

A sudden sound made McCoy sit up sharply. There! There it was again! He listened intently, and was rewarded by the distant sound of voices. A shaft of light pierced the blackness, and his heart gave a great leap of joy as a familiar Scots burr drifted over to him.

"Good God Almighty! They couldna' possibly hae survived under a' that lot!"

McCoy struggled to his knees and leaned forward. "Scotty! Over here, Scotty!"

"Leonard?" Scotty's voice was incredulous. "Leonard, by all that's holy, is that you? Is the Captain wi' you?"

"Yes, Scotty, it's me. Jim's right here beside me. He's...badly injured, but mercifully still alive."

"Hang on, Len. We'll hae ye both oot o' there in no time."

McCoy breathed a sigh of heartfelt relief and laid gentle hands on Kirk's shoulders. "Hold on, Jim. We're going home, do you hear me? We're going home!"

As McCoy's eyes adjusted to the dim light permeating their 'tomb', he saw Kirk's eyelids flicker open. His eyes focused with difficulty on the doctor's face. "Home? They've...found us?"

"Yes, Jim. Listen!" The sound of voices and moving rubble was now clearly audible, and Kirk smiled weakly.

"They found us," he murmured with satisfaction.

"Yes, Jim. It won't be long now before both of us are back on the ship."

Kirk turned his head to look straight into McCoy's eyes, and said quietly, but quite clearly, "The three of us, Bones."

McCoy stared at him for several long seconds, then nodded slowly. "Yes, Jim," he agreed softly, no longer in any doubt. "The three of us."

PART THREE

Spock awoke with a start, his whole body trembling uncontrollably. The nightmare, if such it was, was startlingly vivid in his mind. Every detail stood out with crystal clarity. He had had dreams in the past, although he always maintained that Vulcans didn't dream, but this was like nothing he had ever experienced before. Indeed, if it were someone else's death involved, he would have had extreme difficulty in being convinced it was just a nightmare.

But the inescapable fact remained. It was his own death he had witnessed, through the eyes of his closest friends. Even now, convinced as he was that he was indeed still in the land of the living, he felt a curious dread. A sense of foreboding. Irritably, he shrugged off these morbid thoughts and proceeded to prepare for the day ahead. Was Jim still unconscious? He presumed so, for had not McCoy promised to inform him the instant Jim awoke?

He sighed, wishing, not for the first time, that his commanding officer would exercise a little more caution. He would insist on involving himself in the majority of landing party details, and somehow had the uncanny knack of, more often than not, being the one who got hurt. This present sojourn in sickbay was the result of having been caught under a rockfall on their last planetfall, two days ago. Luckily, it didn't seem too serious; a couple of cracked ribs and concussion, but, up until last night, he still hadn't regained consciousness.

As Spock allowed his mind to dwell on the image of his friend, certain aspects of his nightmare surged, unbidden, into his consciousness, and he shuddered involuntarily. Was the dream exaggerated, or would his death really have such a devastating effect on Jim and McCoy? In all honesty, he felt compelled to acknowledge the fact that there was no exaggeration, especially in Jim's case. He knew how much he meant to his friend. And, despite their famous arguments, he also knew that there was a very special relationship between himself and McCoy.

And Christine? Yes, he could well imagine the heartache his death would cause her. And Uhura, Chekov, Scotty, Sulu? This was getting out of hand, and he firmly thrust the images from him as he left his quarters to make his way to sickbay.

McCoy stood by Jim's bedside, undecided, feeling an irresistible compulsion to buzz Spock's quarters. It was silly, but he had to assure himself that the Vulcan was, in fact, there. He crossed to the intercom and resolutely pressed the button. "Sickbay to Commander Spock."

No response. He tried again, fighting down the illogical fear. Hell, all this fuss over a dream... No, scrub that -- a real humdinger of a nightmare! He was just about to try for a third time when the door swished open, and Spock himself walked into sickbay. With an inward sigh of blessed relief, McCoy steeled his features and turned to face him. "Morning, Spock. Come to see Jim, huh?"

Spock raised an elegant eyebrow and remarked lightly, "Of course, Doctor.

Why else would I voluntarily visit sickbay?"

McCoy grinned and accompanied him to the captain's bedside. As Spock looked down at Kirk, McCoy surreptitiously scrutinised him, thanking all the stars in heaven that the experience of the previous night had just been a nightmare. But, dear God, what a nightmare! He could recall every detail, even now, and instinctively moved closer to Spock, as if seeking reassurance of his presence. He watched the Vulcan closely, taking in the almost imperceptible signs of recent stress - the tenseness of his whole body. He laid a hand on his arm, as much for his own sake as Spock's, and said gently, "He'll be O.K. There are no bones broken and the concussion shouldn't last much longer. In fact, he was stirring a few minutes ago, according to Dr. M'Benga. He should waken fairly soon."

Spock nodded and looked squarely at McCoy for the first time. "Doctor, are you quite well? You look...unusually tired for someone who has just arisen."

A little taken aback at the direct question, McCoy muttered, "Me? Sure, I'm O.K. Just didn't sleep very well last night, that's all."

Spock looked about to say something more, then abruptly changed his mind. Of course there was no connection. Why on earth should there be? He inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement of the doctor's reply, and continued matter-of-factly, "I shall be on the bridge, should you require me during the next four hours."

As he departed, Christine entered from the lab looking like death, struggling to hold her emotions in check.

"That was Spock who was just here, wasn't it?" she asked, almost pleadingly.

McCoy, alarmed at her appearance, stepped towards her and laid his hands on her shoulders. "Yes, he came to see how Jim was." He spoke quietly, looking at her searchingly. At his words, Christine closed her eyes and swayed slightly, and McCoy quickly led her to an examination couch and sat down beside her, a supporting arm around her. He gave her a moment to pull herself together.

"Now," he commanded firmly, "suppose you tell me what all that was about."

She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Doctor. I'm quite all right." She looked at him, and as she met his eyes, she knew suddenly that she wanted - needed - to talk. She had to have someone convince her that it had all been a dream. She looked away and spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. "No, I'm not all right. Last night... I had the most horrific, most heartbreaking nightmare I've ever had in my life. It was all so real..."

"Nightmare? Christine, what was it about?"

As she gazed at him, puzzled at the alarm in his voice, he urged, "It's important, Chris. I have to know."

Slowly, hesitantly, she related her story, and as she spoke the feeling of fear returned, almost suffocating McCoy. It could be himself speaking. There were slight variations - but only in as much as the story was from Christine's point of view rather than his, but the essential theme was identical. He held up a hand, stopping her in mid-sentence.

"Just a minute, Chris. This planet. It was Almiridian, wasn't it?"

Her eyes widened in astonishment. "Yes. But how could you possibly know?"

McCoy swallowed convulsively and looked directly into her eyes. "Do you realise that could have been me telling that story? Every incident is imprinted on my mind. Have you any idea of the odds against two people having exactly the same dream at the same time?"

She stared, dumbfounded. "You mean, you, too... But... That's impossible!"

They gazed at each other in silence, then McCoy went on, thinking aloud, "If it wasn't a dream...what the hell was it? And why us?"

"Do you think maybe we ought to tell someone?"

McCoy sat up straight and clasped his hands together. "No. Not at the moment. I suppose it could just be an incredible coincidence. We've neither of us even heard of Almiridian. No, I think we'll just keep it to ourselves for now, and keep our eyes and ears open. In the meantime, you could search the med-computers for anything on the scarpoa virus, with particular reference to any mutations that might have evolved."

As Christine stood up and left for the lab, McCoy moved to Jim's bedside, deep in thought. It had to be just coincidence. A dream. He found himself praying that it was so. The heartrending memory of Jim's terrible grief enveloped him, and he instinctively laid a comforting hand on the unconscious man's arm.

As Spock stepped out of the elevator onto the bridge, the air of relief was almost tangible. He could actually feel waves of it emanating from Uhura, Chekov and Sulu, and it puzzled him considerably. He approached the command chair, hastily vacated by Sulu, and settled into it, asking for the usual status report as he did so.

"All quiet, sir. Proceeding on course as ordered."

Was it his imagination, or was Sulu's voice a trifle unsteady? He watched intently as the Oriental resumed his own station, but he seemed to have regained his composure. As his eyes flicked over Chekov, that young man abruptly dropped his eyes to his board, colouring slightly.

Spock was not normally prone to intuition, but he knew without doubt that something was definitely amiss here. This belief was confirmed when he swung his chair to face Uhura, just in time to catch her rubbing a sleeve across her eyes. She gazed levelly back, offering no explanation, and after a moment's hesitation, Spock elected not to pursue the matter at the present time, still having considerable difficulty in coming to terms with his own 'problem'.

Instead, he crossed to his science station and keyed the library computer to verify the co-ordinates for their next port of call. As he examined the readout on the screen, he could feel three pairs of eyes boeing into him, and he had to fight down an urge to swing round to face them and demand an explanation for their inordinate interest in him today. After relaying the co-ordinates for course correction to Chekov, Spock keyed in a request for further information regarding their destination. As he rapidly scanned the information, his eye was caught by a name he had hoped never to see again. With fingers which trembled ever so slightly, he backtracked and slowly re-read the data on the screen. He gripped the edge of his console and bent his head, eyes tightly closed. The others, who had been watching his every move, now threw all caution and discipline to the winds, and hurried across to join him, scanning the screen which had been the cause of their First Officer's obvious distress. A concerted gasp escaped them, though none of them was aware of the reason for the others' shock, nobody having brought up the subject on all their minds. Uhura's anguished, "Oh, dear God, no!" brought Spock back to reality, and he straightened and fixed her with his penetrating gaze.

"Lieutenant, please explain."

She was staring in horror at the screen and Spock gripped her arms and turned her to face him. To his intense dismay, her eyes brimmed with tears, and she trembled violently. Somewhat at a loss, he looked for enlightenment to the equally shocked Chekov and Sulu. It was Chekov who eventually broke the silence.

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't know why the others are so affected by that information, I can only speak for myself." He took a deep, calming breath. "One of the planets in that system we are en route for, featured largely in a particularly vivid and extremely distressing nightmare I had last night."

As Chekov's words slowly penetrated, Spock's almost whispered, "Almiridian?"

brought forth astonished reaction from Sulu, Chekov and Uhura.

"Yes, sir!"

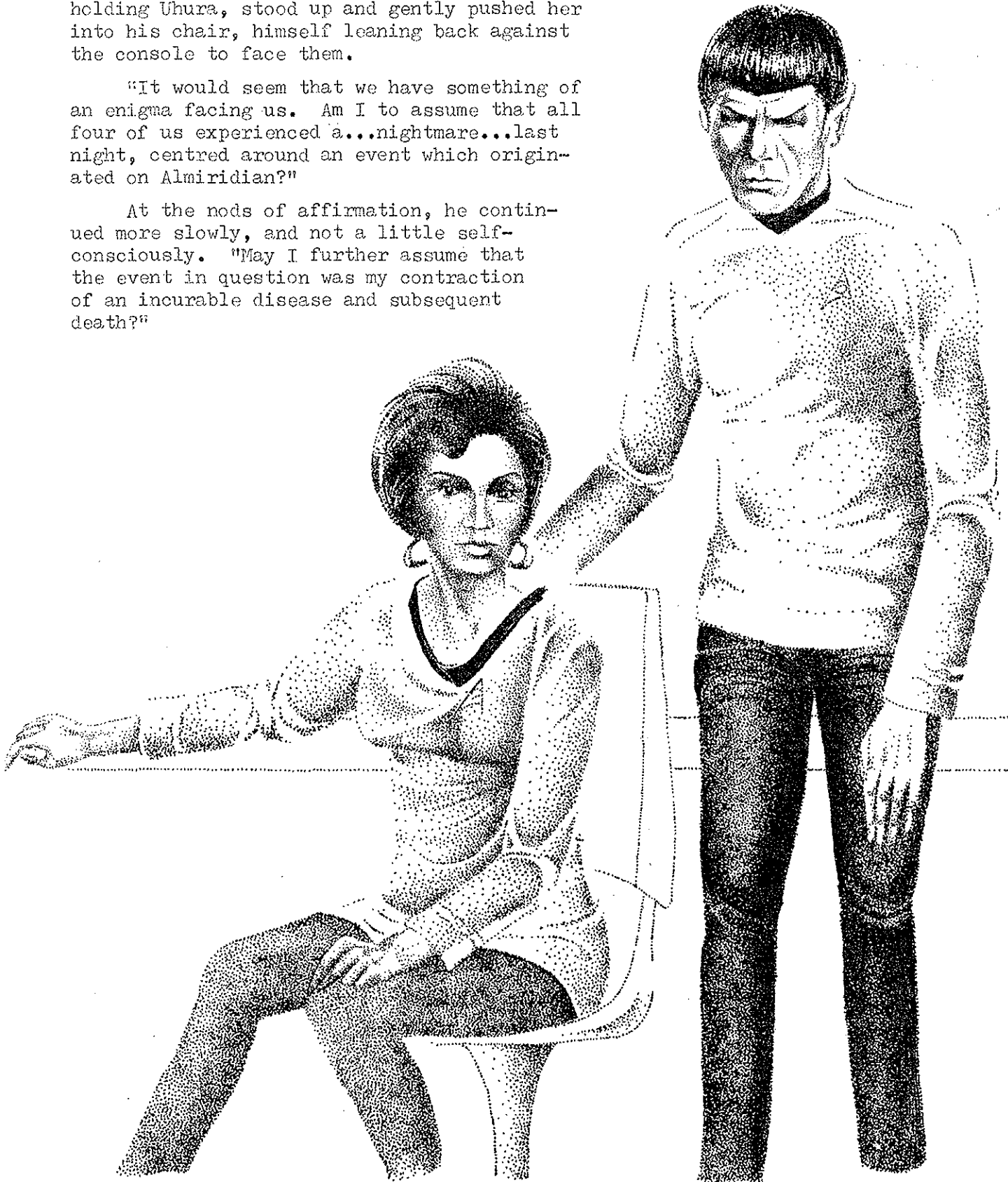
"How did you know?"

"You, too?"

The four stared at each other in consternation, and Spock, suddenly realising he was still holding Uhura, stood up and gently pushed her into his chair, himself leaning back against the console to face them.

"It would seem that we have something of an enigma facing us. Am I to assume that all four of us experienced a...nightmare...last night, centred around an event which originated on Almiridian?"

At the nods of affirmation, he continued more slowly, and not a little self-consciously. "May I further assume that the event in question was my contraction of an incurable disease and subsequent death?"



Uhura gazed up at him in disbelief, making no attempt to control the tears coursing down her cheeks. "Sir, I don't understand. Surely, what you are suggesting is impossible?" She switched her gaze to Sulu and Chekov. "And you two. Did you have the same dream?"

"Yes," they answered in unison.

"But...that's not possible," stammered Chekov. "The odds against all of us having identical dreams are..."

"Astronomical," finished Spock.

"And yet," wondered Uhura, "what other explanation could there possibly be? We've none of us ever come across a planet named Almiridian until now, have we?"

It was obvious from their expressions that her assumption was correct. It was also obvious that they had all, indeed, gone through an identical experience.

"Four of us," mused Spock, "shared a dream. I wonder..." He broke off and leaned over to flip the switch on the intercom at his console. "Bridge to sickbay."

"Yes, Spock, what can I do for you? If it's about Jim - "

"No, Doctor, not this time," Spock interrupted. "Doctor, this may sound strange, but does the planet Almiridian hold any special significance for you?"

There was a stunned silence at the other end which seemed to go on for ever.

"Doctor, are you still there?"

"Yes... Yes, I'm still here. I think... I'd better come up."

The bridge crew exchanged glances. No-one dared to voice an opinion, and they stood, waiting apprehensively for the doctor's arrival. As the elevator doors opened, McCoy and Christine stepped out to find the usually orderly bridge personnel gathered round Spock, Uhura still sitting in his chair, tears clearly visible on her cheeks. Taking in the scene at a glance, McCoy came straight to the point. "Did any of you have a nightmare concerning Spock's death, last night?"

Spock himself answered. "We all did, Doctor. You two did too?"

"Yes, we did too. What the hell's goin' on round here? It just isn't possible that six people, in six different locations, suffer from the same nightmare!"

Spock sighed. "The words possible, impossible and nightmare have been used frequently in the last few minutes. Quite obviously it is not only possible, but has been proved, conclusively, to have occurred."

"Do you know if anyone else was affected?"

"Doctor," retorted Spock, a little sharply, "until this moment, we were not even aware that the six of us were involved. I have no idea how many more, but I would suspect that the only others will be Mr. Scott and Captain Kirk."

McCoy looked at him curiously. "How do you arrive at that supposition?"

Spock looked at each of them in turn. "In this...I suppose we will have to continue using the term 'nightmare'...do any of you remember any other person playing a significant part in it, other than ourselves, Mr. Scott and the Captain?"

"Yes, sir." All eyes regarded Christine.

"Yes?" Spock prompted gently.

"Your parents, Mr. Spock."

"Of course. I was thinking in terms of the Enterprise, but it is possible that my parents also have had a similar experience. Anyone else?"

Everyone shook their heads with the exception of McCoy. "There was one other."

Spock nodded. "Yes, Doctor. If my theory is correct, you, myself and the Captain will be the only ones to remember the other person."

The doctor appeared a little bewildered, but after a moment's thought his face cleared. "Of course. Only Jim and I accompanied your body back to Vulcan for the funeral, where we met T'Pol."

"Exactly. It would seem that each of us experienced this...vision...only as far as we were individually involved. As if it were actually happening."

"Yes, of course. In normal circumstances we would only remember an event from our own point of view." McCoy looked at Spock thoughtfully. "How come you suffered the same nightmare? I mean, you were dead halfway through."

"That I cannot answer, Doctor. I can think of no logical explanation."

"I think we ought to get Scotty up here, and get this thing straight."

"Agreed."

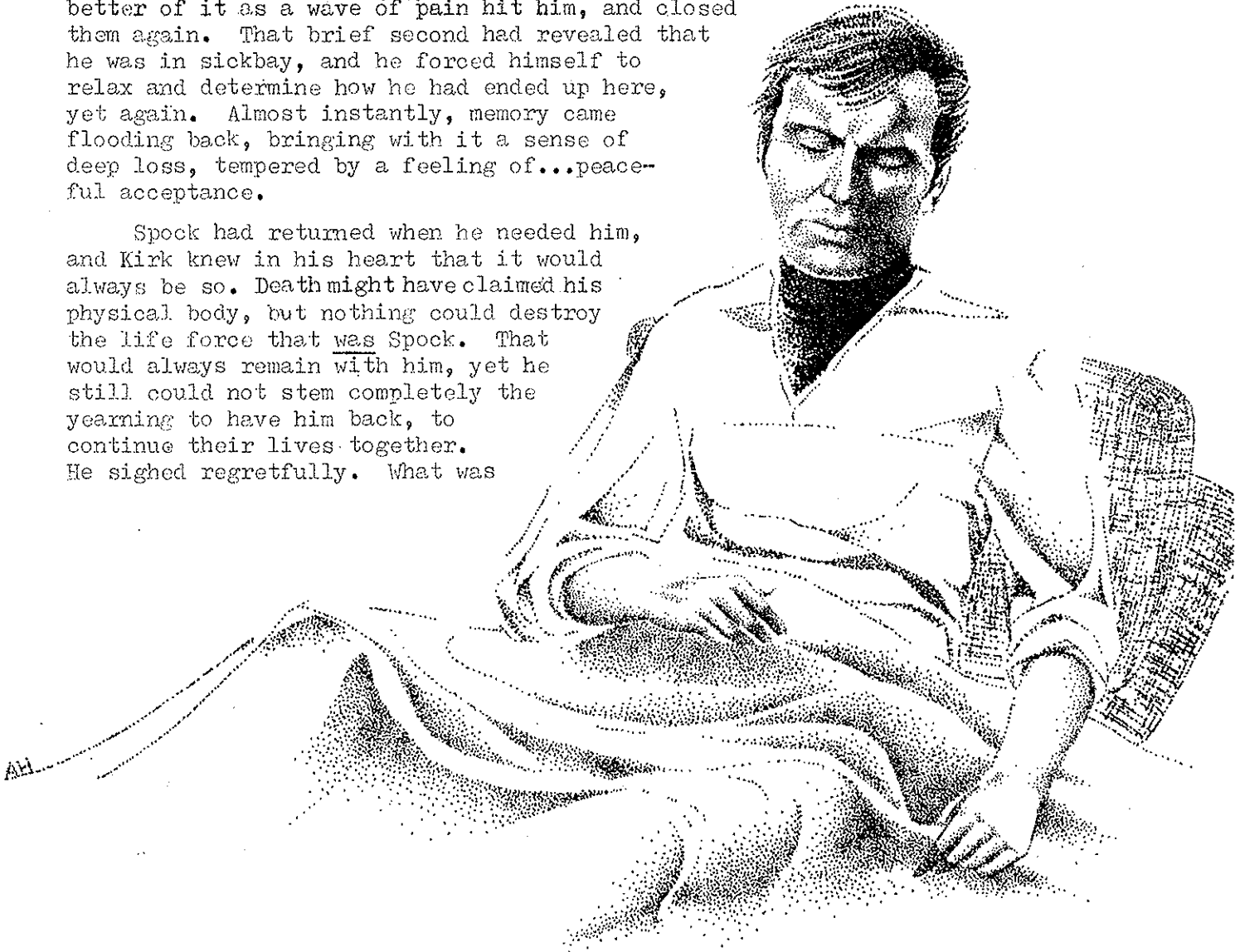
As Spock leaned over to the intercom to summon the Chief Engineer, Uhura voiced the thought uppermost in all their minds.

"What about Captain Kirk? He's still unconscious. If he's suffered the same nightmare... Doctor, he won't know it's just a dream. He'll still be convinced that Mr. Spock is...dead!"

PART FOUR

Jim Kirk opened his eyes, immediately 'thought better of it as a wave of pain hit him, and closed them again. That brief second had revealed that he was in sickbay, and he forced himself to relax and determine how he had ended up here, yet again. Almost instantly, memory came flooding back, bringing with it a sense of deep loss, tempered by a feeling of...peaceful acceptance.

Spock had returned when he needed him, and Kirk knew in his heart that it would always be so. Death might have claimed his physical body, but nothing could destroy the life force that was Spock. That would always remain with him, yet he still could not stem completely the yearning to have him back, to continue their lives together. He sighed regretfully. What was



that old, old phrase his ancestors had used? 'Wishing for the moon'. That, of course, no longer applied; Man now had the Moon, the planets, the stars, but he understood the sentiment.

Steeling himself, he very slowly opened his eyes again and, to his relief, the pain had subsided to a dull ache. He moved his head experimentally. The room spun for an instant, then steadied, and he gradually eased himself into a sitting position. M'Benga chose that moment to enter, and he quickly crossed to the bed.

"Sir, you really shouldn't be sitting up. You've been unconscious for two days. That was a nasty knock on the head you got."

Kirk smiled. "I'm O.K. Just a bit of a headache. Those Klingons sure have a lot to answer for."

A little puzzled, M'Benga enquired, "Klingons, sir?"

"Yes, Klingons, Doctor. The ones who set the trap down there. Was anyone else hurt in the explosion?"

M'Benga refrained from pointing out that there had been no explosion, whether set up by Klingons or otherwise, and replied carefully, "No, sir, there were no other casualties."

"Well, that's a relief anyway. I assume Mr. Sulu will have commenced investigations to discover the whereabouts of the Klingons?"

"Mr. Sulu, sir?"

Kirk stared at him irritably. "That's the second time you've repeated something I've said, in as many minutes. I asked if Mr. Sulu had -- "

"Yes, sir, I heard what you said. I'm afraid I don't understand. Why Mr. Sulu?"

"Why...?" Kirk stopped in exasperation, then continued slowly, "Doctor, is it you or I who has suffered a head injury? As First Officer, it is Mr. Sulu's duty to -- "

M'Benga stopped himself from echoing Kirk's words yet again, and stepped back a pace. "Excuse me, Captain, I think I'd better call Dr. McCoy."

"Yes, Doctor, you do that. Maybe he'll be able to give me a sensible answer. Where is he, anyway?"

"On the bridge, sir."

"The bridge? Is someone injured?"

"I don't know, sir. He hurried into the lab a few minutes ago, collected Nurse Chapel, and told me to hold the fort as he was going to the bridge."

Kirk flung back the cover and swung his legs over the side of the bed, gripping the edge as a wave of nausea swept over him. M'Benga was there in an instant, a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Captain, what are you doing?"

Biting his lip in an effort to stem the rising nausea, Kirk closed his eyes and fought to regain control. After several long seconds he looked up.

"I must find out what's going on. If Bones and Nurse Chapel have gone hurrying off to the bridge, something must be seriously wrong!"

"But sir, you're in no fit state to go anywhere! Please stay right where you are, and I'll contact the bridge."

Kirk drew himself upright and his eyes met those of the doctor calmly, determination written clearly on his features. "Doctor, I have told you, I am perfectly all right." He held up a hand, forestalling the doctor's obvious denial. "Very well, I'll stay here. You contact the bridge and find out what the hell's happening!"

M'Benga hesitated for a moment to assure himself that the Captain was indeed 'all right', then he moved quickly to the intercom. "Sickbay to bridge."

"Bridge here. Do you wish to speak to Dr. McCoy?"

M'Benga's reply was lost to Kirk as he stared in stunned disbelief at the intercom. That voice! It wasn't possible! The head injury must be worse than he thought and his fevered imagination was playing a horrific trick on him. An anguished cry was wrung from his lips as his tortured mind refused to accept what his ears told him, and blackness descended on him once more. M'Benga swung round as Kirk's body crashed to the floor. With a hurried, "Dr. McCoy is urgently needed in sickbay," he raced to Kirk's side.

In less than a minute the doors to sickbay swooshed open and McCoy catapulted through, closely followed by Spock.

"What happened?" McCoy replied tersely, as he dropped to his knees at Kirk's side. M'Benga, rising to his feet to make way for Spock, related exactly what had occurred up to the moment he had contacted the bridge.

"I don't know exactly what caused his collapse. He seemed all right... angry, in fact, until I spoke to Mr. Spock."

"Had you mentioned Spock before then?"

"No, sir. In fact, his name wasn't mentioned at all, which is very strange."

"No, Doctor, it isn't strange at all," Spock observed quietly.

"Sir?"

Spock looked directly at M'Benga. "Think very carefully back to the moment of the Captain's collapse. Was it before or after I replied to your summons?"

The dark doctor's face creased in concentration. "I had my back to him... I think it was after you replied. As I said, he was angry at my confusion, and readily agreed to my summoning Dr. McCoy, so that he could... 'get a sensible answer' was, I believe, the term he used."

Spock and McCoy exchanged glances. "That would seem to bear out our theory, Doctor. Obviously the Captain did suffer the same nightmare as the rest of us, but, due to his deep unconsciousness from the blow to his head, it had a much greater impact on him. So much so that on regaining consciousness he remained firmly convinced that the whole thing had really happened. Waking up in sickbay with strapped up ribs and a head injury would also coincide with the injuries he sustained from the 'Klingons' booby trap', thus reinforcing that conviction in his subconscious."

McCoy slowly nodded, taking in the full implications of Spock's words. "So Uhura was right. He does believe you're dead! Oh, my God! After all that, finally coming to terms with your 'death'... suddenly hearing your voice again... no wonder he collapsed."

Both men gazed down at the closed eyes of their commanding officer, then McCoy murmured gruffly, "We'd better get him back into bed. Give me a hand, will you, Spock?"

"It's all right, Doctor, I can manage." With these words Spock leaned forward and gently lifted Kirk into his arms, holding him briefly for a few seconds before laying him on the bed. Quickly scanning the readings above Kirk's head, McCoy breathed a sigh of relief.

"He'll be all right. He's only fainted." Resting a hand lightly on his hair, he looked across at Spock. "What do we do now? He's going to wake up confused and scared."

Spock's features reflected his concern as he asked, a little uncertainly, "In his present state of mind, do you think he could take a direct confrontation?"

McCoy's anxious gaze flicked from Spock's to Kirk's face. "I'm not sure; I would say not. He's firmly convinced you're dead. Coming face to face with a ghost could prove a traumatic experience. The same goes for a mind link. I really don't think he could cope on this particular occasion. You see, on similar occasions in the past, he's had to accept your apparent death. But always, in the back of his mind, has been the conviction that there was a logical explanation. He's never really believed that you'd been taken from him. But this! Spock, you had the same nightmare. You followed it through, step by step. You saw his terrible grief and pain at your death. And remember, to Jim it was no nightmare. He firmly believes it to have actually occurred. There's no way out this time for him. Spock, you died in his arms! He took your body to Vulcan, watched your burial... It's real this time, no possible doubt!"

He broke off as he saw the effect his words were having on Spock. The Vulcan stood rigidly, eyes closed, fighting for composure. In an instant McCoy was at his side, a comforting arm round him as he led him from the room, throwing quick instructions over his shoulder to the still bewildered M'Benga, to inform him immediately if Kirk showed signs of waking.

Pushing Spock into a seat in his office, he crossed to the cabinet on the wall and withdrew a bottle and glass. Pouring a measure into the glass, he thrust it into the Vulcan's hand. "Drink it!" he commanded. A little to his surprise, Spock downed the liquid without protest, grimacing at the taste. McCoy laid a firm hand on his shoulder, noting with satisfaction that the colour was slowly returning to his ashen cheeks. He started to speak quietly. "I'm sorry, Spock. That was stupid of me. I just didn't think. I'm afraid we all tend to regard you as something of a superman, taking everything in your stride without a qualm. It must have been a horrifying experience for you, witnessing your own death like that, and then discovering that the rest of us had had exactly the same experience. I can't even begin to imagine how I would have reacted, had it been my death so vividly portrayed."

Spock was rapidly regaining control of his shattered composure, and raised his eyes to the doctor's face. "Thank you, Doctor. I am quite...recovered now. And it wasn't just the..."

"I know, Spock," interrupted McCoy gently. "It's Jim, isn't it? The thought of his being convinced of your death."

Spock nodded wordlessly, his eyes reflecting his inner torment. "Bones." McCoy smiled slightly at the Vulcan's unconscious use of Jim's nickname for him. "What are we going to do? How do we convince him that it was all a dream, without causing any further damage?"

"Leave it to me. I'll break it to him gently when he wakes. In the meantime, maybe you'd be better off on the bridge? Help take your mind off all this."

"I doubt that, Doctor."

Something in the tone of the Vulcan's voice brought McCoy's head up sharply. "Spock, what is it? There's something more, isn't there?"

Rising to his feet and adopting his habitual stance, hands clasped behind his back, Spock regarded the other man steadily. "Yes, Doctor, I'm afraid there is. You see, a few moments before I contacted you in sickbay, I checked the computer for information relating to our next port of call. As you are no doubt aware, we are undertaking a survey of the star system Ineptrae Dragna."

"And?" prompted McCoy as Spock fell silent, his mind unwillingly returning to that fateful moment on the bridge.

"And," he continued, slowly walking towards the door, "one of the planets of that star system is...Almiridian."

With the last word, Spock stepped through the door and out of sickbay, leaving McCoy staring, transfixed, behind him.

"Doctor!"

M'Benga's call from the ward jolted McCoy out of his horror-stricken immobility. Hurriedly he re-entered the ward, waving the other doctor out as he did so. This was likely to be...difficult, and he preferred to be alone with Jim. He waited as the man in the bed slowly opened his eyes and fixed his gaze unwaveringly on the doctor.

"Bones," he muttered thickly. "What...what happened?"

"You fainted, Jim. Don't worry about it right now."

McCoy watched anxiously as Kirk struggled to remember. "Fainted? Why... should I..." He reached out suddenly and grasped McCoy's arm. "Bones! I heard him! I heard Spock's voice!"

"Easy, Jim. Calm down."

"You still don't believe me, do you? Even after what happened down there."

McCoy turned his head away to hide the sudden glint of tears. This was going to be more difficult than he'd imagined. He felt the fingers of Kirk's hand tighten on his arm.

"Bones, I'm sorry. I know you do believe me; you admitted as much...after they found us...but...but..."

He watched the play of emotions on Kirk's face as the Captain tried to come to terms with this new development. "But Bones, this was...different. He wasn't talking to me. It was just his voice on the intercom...from the bridge. Bones, how could that be?" He struggled to raise himself on his elbows and McCoy gently pushed him back, hoisting himself onto the side of the bed.

"Jim, relax. Just take it easy and listen to me. Can you remember the accident?"

"Accident?"

"Yes, Jim, the accident that brought you to sickbay in the first place?"

Kirk looked at him in puzzlement. "Vaguely. But what has that to do..."

"Please, Jim. Don't ask questions. Just try to remember. Think back, slowly. Now, what happened?"

Still a little confused, he obeyed. "We beamed down to Pollux 6 to investigate reports of a Klingon attack. The whole thing was a trap...the Klingons were waiting for us. I...was shot with...some sort of paralysing gun, and Karath told me the building was rigged to explode. The Klingons beamed back to their ship... I remember yelling at Chekov...to get out, then...nothing. When I woke up... there was pain...and fear...and then," his voice took on a note of awe, "then, suddenly, there wasn't any pain. He was there, Bones. I needed him desperately, and...he came."

McCoy deliberately closed his mind against the torrent of emotion that threatened to destroy his hard won composure. "Go on, Jim," he urged.

Kirk swallowed hard. "I don't...remember much after that...you told me they'd found us...that we were going home...then the next thing I remember is waking here...all bandaged up."

McCoy pounced on the opening he had sought. "All bandaged up! Jim, look at yourself!" He grasped Kirk's wrists and held his arms up in front of his eyes. "Look, Jim!"

Kirk stared at his bare arms in bewilderment. "But...I don't understand. They were bandaged...I know they were."

"Were they, Jim?" McCoy's voice was urgent. "Think! When you woke up before - they weren't bandaged then, were they?"

Kirk frowned in concentration. "No... No, I remember now, they weren't."

It didn't register at the time, but...no, there were no bandages." He raised puzzled eyes to McCoy's. "But...the explosion?"

"What explosion?" McCoy spoke slowly and distinctly, fixing his gaze on Kirk's face.

"The booby trap set by the Klingons. You were there..." He stopped as McCoy shook his head.

"Jim, there was no explosion."

"Of course there was an explosion!" he shouted. "Where do you think I got these..." His voice tailed off as he stared again at his undamaged arms, then closed his eyes. There was no sound for several seconds, then he spoke in a whisper. "There was no explosion?"

"No, Jim. No explosion." McCoy held his breath, waiting.

"No explosion," repeated Kirk slowly, opening his eyes and staring straight ahead. "No Klingons?"

"No."

Kirk turned his head to look directly into his friend's eyes. "Bones, what are you trying to tell me? I imagined it? Dreamed it?" He searched the doctor's face, fighting desperately against the sudden illogical hope that flared somewhere within him. McCoy remained silent, retaining a firm grip on Kirk's wrists as the implications slowly began to sink into his befuddled brain. "A dream...the Klingons, the explosion...all a dream? And...the rest? Oh God, Bones...the rest. Is it possible?"

Up until that moment, McCoy had let him work it out gradually by himself. Now, he judged, was the time to intervene, to help.

"Yes, Jim. The rest too."

"But you don't know. You...can't know..."

"Jim, calm down and listen. I've let you work it out so far by yourself, because you wouldn't have believed me if I'd told you the truth straight out. It would have come as too much of a shock, and I didn't dare take the risk. But now you've managed to break through part of the way, I think it's safe enough to set your mind at rest."

Kirk looked up at him, barely breathing, afraid to allow the tiny flare of hope to fan into a flame, as McCoy continued.

"Last night, eight people on this ship experienced exactly the same nightmare. Because of your increased susceptibility through being deeply unconscious, it had a much deeper impact on you, so that on waking, you actually believed it to have occurred. It didn't, Jim. You have to believe that! It didn't happen!"

"It...didn't happen? Almiridian -- the scarpoa virus mutation -- Vulcan?"

"No, Jim, none of it."

"It...didn't...happen." The words were whispered hesitantly, almost unbelievably. Kirk's eyes closed tightly in an effort to stop the tears which threatened to engulf him, and McCoy crossed quickly to the intercom, speaking quietly, out of Kirk's hearing.

"Sickbay to bridge."

"Yes, Doctor." The reply came instantly.

"Spock, get down here now!"

Without waiting for an acknowledgement he returned to Kirk, who still lay, eyes closed, fighting a losing battle against the tears of joy and relief which would no longer be held at bay. At the light touch on his arm, he looked up and whispered brokenly, "Bones...where...where is he?"

McCoy swallowed the lump in his throat and squeezed his arm comfortingly. "He's on his way, Jim. It's all right. Everything's all right now." He blinked furiously against unshed tears as Kirk's hand reached out to cover his.

As the door to sickbay swished open, McCoy gently disengaged Kirk's hand and stood aside as Spock walked slowly into the room. He watched Kirk closely as uncertainty, hesitant acceptance, relief and joy passed in rapid succession across his features, and he backed away as Spock took his place at the side of the bed. For a long moment neither spoke, then Kirk whispered, "Spock! It really is you? I am awake now, aren't I?"

"Yes, Jim, I am here." Spock's voice was infinitely gentle and a smile touched his lips as he reached out and covered one of Kirk's hands with his own.

At his touch, the fragile control Kirk had managed to maintain finally gave way, and with a convulsive sob, he flung his arms round his friend and hugged him close. Silently, McCoy withdrew, leaving the two together. Neither of his friends needed him at this moment, and he urgently needed a few minutes alone.

PART FIVE

"The whole thing's incredible!" exclaimed Scotty from his position in temporary command of the Enterprise. "Absolutely incredible!"

"Yes," murmured Uhura quietly, "and it's not over yet."

He followed her gaze as she stared, mesmerised, at the viewscreen where a tiny point of light marked their destination.

It was a sobering thought to the five people left on the bridge. The discovery which had brought things to a head had not been mentioned again, and now it was brought home to them with stunning force as the Enterprise sped onward, ever closer to a small, unexplored planet named Almiridian.

The swish of the elevator doors broke the silence, and McCoy stepped out onto the bridge, his whole bearing reflecting the emotional tension of the last hour or so. Scotty swiftly rose to his feet and ushered his friend into the command chair. "Are ye all right, Len?"

"Yes... Yes, I'm fine," McCoy answered tiredly. "But, oh God, I wouldn't want to go through that again."

"Rough, was it?"

"Umm... You could say that."

"How are things now, down there?"

McCoy leaned back comfortably, eyes closed. "Oh, I think they'll be O.K. Jim's finally accepted that Spock's alive, though he took some convincing at first."

"The problem now, of course," mused Uhura after a moment, "is, what do we do about that survey?"

McCoy sat up abruptly. "Well, one thing's for sure," he declared with feeling, "there's no way Spock's going down there! If last night's...occurrence ...wasn't a warning, my name's not Leonard McCoy!" He looked across to where Christine sat in Spock's chair. "Chris, did you, by any chance, dig up anything on that Vulcan virus mutation?"

Christine shuddered. "Nothing. In fact, no more than we all knew from..." She broke off, catching her breath at the memory. Clearing her throat, she started again, in a purely businesslike manner. "I couldn't find any trace of a mutation of the virus. Obviously, the Romulans kept it to themselves, if, indeed, there ever was one. As far as we know, the original virus is pretty common on Vulcan, affecting mainly children. Symptoms are a slight fever and sore throat, not dissimilar to the common cold in Humans. If, however, there is a mutation, there's no guarantee that it wouldn't affect Humans."

A chill seemed to descend over the bridge at the quiet words, then Chekov ventured, "So we do not know if any of us would be safe?"

"If we are to be guided by our...premonition, I suppose we're compelled to regard it as - Humans should be immune."

"How'd ye work that out, Sulu?" enquired Scotty.

"Well, Mr. Spock wasn't alone on the survey; he took a landing party with him, including Dr. McCoy here, and no-one else was affected."

"Aye," Scotty agreed slowly, "but I dinna ken that I'd care tae risk it ma'sel."

"Besides which," added Christine, "there is the possibility that, even if the disease doesn't affect Humans, it could still be carried and transmitted by them, in which case," she finished fearfully, "Spock still wouldn't be safe, even if he remained on the ship."

"I suppose," continued Sulu, "we have to accept that it was a warning...a premonition...we were given? I mean, how do we know that there is a Romulan ship harbouring a deadly disease on that planet?"

McCoy turned to regard him steadily. "Would you be prepared to take the risk?"

"No, sir," replied Sulu, colouring slightly. "I was just thinking of Starfleet."

"Aye, the lad's got a point there. We can hardly tell Starfleet that we're sorry, we won't be completing the survey assigned to us, because we all had a dream!"

"That is exactly what we will be telling them!"

"Jim!! What the hell are you doing out of bed?" McCoy swung the command chair to face the elevator, which no-one had heard arrive. "Spock, what did you let him up here for?"

"He is the Captain," remarked Spock calmly, "and I did try to dissuade him, to no avail. He can be very stubborn."

McCoy stared at him. "Coming from you, that's laughable, but I take your point. He can be very stubborn at times."

"Will you two stop discussing me as if I weren't here?" demanded Kirk with mock severity. "And Bones, if you wouldn't mind, I would rather like to sit down."

Realising he was still in the command chair, McCoy hastily removed himself, as Spock helped the distinctly unsteady Captain Kirk into it. Whipping out his ever-present medi-scanner, he proceeded to pass it over Kirk's body until the Captain waved it away from his face with a touch of impatience. "Bones, for heaven's sake, put that thing away. Don't you ever go anywhere without it?"

"Nope." McCoy was completely unabashed. He studied the readings, and with a sigh of resignation, observed, "Well... I suppose you'll do. You really shouldn't be out of bed yet, but, under the circumstances..."

"Yes," finished Kirk, suddenly serious. "Under the circumstances, I want - I have to - be here." He swung to face Chekov. "Mr. Chekov, how long before we reach Ineptrae Dragna?"

Chekov consulted his board and replied, "Three hours, twenty-six minutes, sir."

"Three and a half hours," repeated Kirk slowly, with a sideways glance at Spock. Turning to the communications station, he continued, "Uhura, put in a call to Starfleet, please."

"Yes, sir... Sir... It's good to see you... I mean...that is..." She broke off in confusion.

"It's all right, Uhura," smiled Kirk. "I understand; thank you."

Returning his smile gratefully, Uhura transferred her attention to her console.

Sweeping his gaze round the bridge, Kirk asked, "Have we established whether or not anyone else was affected by last night's...vision, or was it just confined to the eight of us?"

"To all intents and purposes," stated Spock, with deliberate casualness, "only the eight of us here at this moment shared the same experience. Several others have confessed to suffering a nightmare last night, but none can remember any details - only a vague feeling of unease on waking."

"Hmm. I take it we're all agreed that it was a definite warning?"

A chorus of "Yes, sir," "Aye, sir," and "Definitely," met this question, and Spock ventured carefully, "It would certainly appear to be a great deal more than mere coincidence."

"Exactly! Consequently, no member of the crew of this ship is going anywhere near Almiridian."

"Sir," spoke up Uhura, "I have Commodore Wengel."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Put it on the screen."

"Yes, sir."

The stars on the viewscreen vanished, to be replaced by the austere visage of Commodore Wengel. "Captain Kirk."

"Commodore," acknowledged Kirk. "As you are no doubt aware, the Enterprise is at present on a survey mission of the star system Ineptrae Dragna."

"Yes, Captain, I am aware of that fact. Are you having trouble?"

"No, sir. At least, not the kind of trouble usually associated with surveys."

"Explain."

Jumping in with both feet, Kirk commenced, "Sir, I request that I be given permission to exclude one of the planets from the survey."

"Indeed? For what reason?"

Now came the difficult part. "During the last few hours, several of my senior officers have experienced an identical...vision, you could call it. On examination, we have concluded that we have been given a definite warning to steer clear of Almiridian."

"Really, Captain." Wengel looked faintly amused. "A...vision... I believe that was the term you used? Am I to understand that you are electing to forego a planetary survey because of a...vision?"

"Yes, sir, that is exactly what I do mean."

All trace of feigned humour disappeared from Wengel's tone. "Captain, survey reports on this particular system could be crucial to the Federation, as you yourself know perfectly well. Long range scanners have detected mineral deposits which could be of inestimable value to us. You have your orders. Unless you can give me a valid reason for not carrying out those orders, I'm afraid I will have to insist."

Kirk maintained an air of calm diplomacy with great difficulty. "Sir, I gave you my reason. The experience of my crew...had a dramatic impact on all of them. It cannot be put down to coincidence. Eight officers, including myself and my Vulcan First Officer, suffered the same nightmare down to the smallest detail. I am convinced that there is a great danger to us if we venture down to the surface of Almiridian, and for that reason I refuse to risk any member of my crew."

The Commodore straightened and glared ominously at the image of Captain Kirk.

"Danger is our business, Captain. Orders must be obeyed regardless of personal risk."

"I am well aware of that, sir," Kirk almost spat out through clenched teeth, "as are my crew. Our past record illustrates our devotion to duty quite graphically. However, on this occasion circumstances force me to take extreme measures. I will not risk my men!"

The last sentence was delivered with great emphasis on each word, and the knuckles stood out white on Kirk's hands as he gripped the arms of his chair.

"This is flagrant dereliction of duty, Captain Kirk! You are, I presume, aware of the consequences of your actions?"

"Yes, sir. Perfectly."

"Very well. The matter will be referred to a higher authority. But I warn you, Starfleet Command does not recognise...premonitions. You will proceed with your mission with regard to the other planets of the system, and await instructions."

"Yes, sir. However, I must point out my decision will be the same."

"That is, of course, your prerogative. Starfleet out."

As the image of the Commodore faded from the screen, the assembled officers let out the breath they had all unconsciously been holding.

"Phew!" whistled McCoy. "You sure stirred up a hornet's nest there, Jim. You could be court-martialled. Have you thought of that?"

Kirk met his gaze unflinchingly. "Yes, Bones, I thought of that. It doesn't alter my decision in the slightest."

"Jim," Spock spoke quietly, "I appreciate your concern, but this could cost you your career."

"And you, your life! Do you really imagine I have a choice? My career against your life? It isn't a question of choice. I have none!"

The unashamed emotion in his voice effectively silenced any further discussion on the matter, and to break the sudden air of tension, Scotty cheerfully declared, "I'd just like to see them court-martial the entire crew of the Enterprise. Because that's what it would amount to, believe me. Given the circumstances, not one person on this ship will go down to Almiridian. I'd stake ma life on it."

Kirk smiled in spite of himself. "Thanks, Scotty. Let's hope it doesn't come to that." At his sudden intake of breath, McCoy had his scanner out instantly, and took a quick reading.

"Scotty, take over here, will you? I'm taking the Captain to sickbay." He glared purposefully at Kirk as he attempted to protest. "No arguments, Jim! That's a medical order! You need rest, and I aim to see you get it, with or without your co-operation. Will you come quietly, or do I have to get Spock to carry you?"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Spock."

As Spock stepped towards him, Kirk held up his hands in mock surrender. "O.K. O.K., you win. I'll come quietly."

He got unsteadily to his feet, gratefully accepting the Vulcan's help, and the three of them made a slow exit from the bridge.

PART SIX

It was hot! Funny, after all these years of living on Vulcan, she'd never really noticed how hot it could get. Amanda paced restlessly, trying, without success, to rid her mind of memories of the previous night. It was illogical,

she told herself for the hundredth time that day. It wasn't as if it was the first time she'd had a nightmare, after all; not even the first time she'd dreamed of her son's death. But never before had she been able to recall every gesture, every look, every word, so clearly. Should she have told Sarek this morning? No...of course not! He was very understanding, always, but even he had his limits. To burden him with details of a nightmare was asking too much. Besides, he'd been very pre-occupied this morning, she remembered. He'd hardly spoken at breakfast. Maybe this evening she would find an opportunity to broach the subject.

In the event, it was Sarek himself who brought up the matter as they sat together after dinner. His pre-occupation of the morning was still very much in evidence, and Amanda at last felt compelled to ask, "Sarek, is something wrong?"

"Wrong? Why should you assume that there is anything wrong?"

"You're very quiet." She smiled at the raised eyebrow. "I know. You're hardly effusive at any time, but today you've been unusually reticent. You've hardly said a word to me. I just wondered if, perhaps, there is something on your mind." A sudden thought struck her. "You're not ill, are you? You're looking very tired. You haven't had a recurrence of that heart trouble?"

Sarek held up a hand. "Please, Amanda, do not fuss. I assure you, I am quite well."

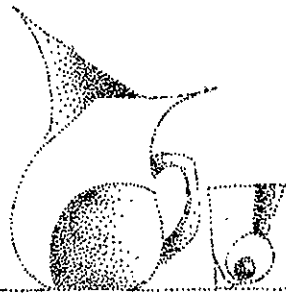
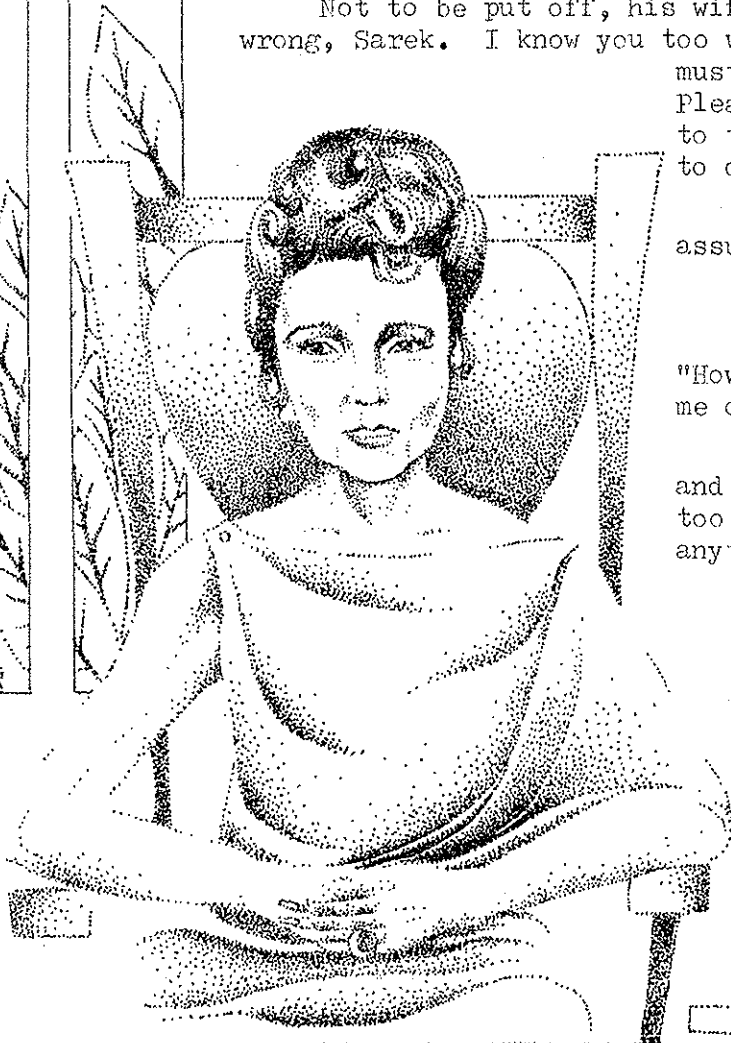
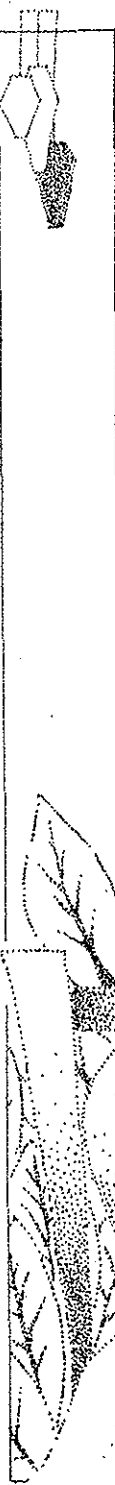
Not to be put off, his wife persisted. "There's something wrong, Sarek. I know you too well. If you're not ill, then you must be worried about something. Please tell me. It sometimes helps to talk about things. Is it something to do with your work at the Academy?"

"No. No, nothing like that," he assured her.

"Then there is something?"

Sarek sighed in exasperation. "How do you invariably manage to catch me out in this way?"

Amanda leaned back in her chair and smiled. "I told you. I know you too well by now not to notice when anything's wrong."



Sarek appeared a little embarrassed. "It's nothing, really. I wouldn't have bothered you with it, if you hadn't persisted in your cross-examination."

"Go on," she prompted.

"Very well, if you insist. I had a most...disturbing experience, in the early hours of this morning."

Amanda was instantly alert. "Disturbing... You mean, a nightmare?"

"Yes...I suppose you would use that term, although Vulcans are not normally prone to such things."

"Poppycock!" Amanda automatically retorted, though she was feeling far from flippant at that particular moment. "This...dream... What was it about? Can you remember?"

"Obviously, or I would not be troubled by it now. Really, Amanda, you can be most illogical at times."

"I know. And don't prevaricate. This nightmare...did it concern Spock?"

Sarek waved a hand dismissively. "Do not alarm yourself. It was, after all, merely an...illusion."

Amanda strove to keep the fear out of her voice. "Please, Sarek. Don't just dismiss it like that. You don't understand. It could be important. You see..." she took a deep breath "...I, myself, have spent the whole day trying to rid myself of memories of a particularly distressing nightmare I suffered last night."

Her husband was all attention now, though he kept his concern carefully hidden. "Indeed? What was so distressing, to have made such an impression?"

Now it came to the point, Amanda was strangely reluctant to go on, but feeling Sarek's gaze on her, she steeled herself to say, "We received a message from the Enterprise, informing us of our son's...death, from a virus he'd picked up on a survey. I know that, in itself, is not too significant; I've dreamed of Spock's death on many occasions. It's inevitable, I suppose, in view of the fact that he faces danger almost every day in his chosen career, and I can't altogether subdue the constant fear I feel for him. But in this instance it was all so very much more...real. I actually seemed to live through it. Jim brought...Spock's body home, and we beamed up to the Enterprise. Oh, Sarek, I can still remember the look on Jim's face as he met us in the transporter room. He looked so...lost, so alone...and frightened." She shuddered. "I hope I never see that look on anyone, ever again. He and Dr. McCoy came with us to Vulcan to attend the funeral ...and...and, when it was over, and they beamed back to the ship...I felt as though the last link with our...son had been broken..."

Her voice broke at the remembered pain of that final parting, and her eyes filled with tears. Sarek moved to sit by her side, and with a muffled sob, she relaxed against him and let the tears flow.

Holding his wife in his arms, Sarek allowed his mind to dwell on his own experience, reliving it step by step. The events coincided exactly with those just related by Amanda, and the thought troubled him greatly. As her tears subsided, Amanda raised anxious eyes to those of her husband.

"Sarek, was yours..."

"Almost identical," was the quiet reply.

"But what does it mean? It can't possibly be...true, can it?" She gripped his arms convulsively. "It's an accepted fact that sometimes close relatives 'feel' another's death. Sarek, you don't suppose Spock could be...dead?"

"Please do not jump to such conclusions. It could well be just a shared nightmare. The bond between us has strengthened over the years, and it is not beyond the realms of possibility for one of us to have sensed the other's thoughts."

"You know that isn't the case. Sensing one's thoughts is one thing, but this

was far more than that. Such a sharing has never happened to us before. Sarek... I'm afraid. Is there any way we can contact the Enterprise?"

Sarek looked doubtful. "What reason could I possibly give? I have no idea where the ship is at the moment. It could be at the other side of the Galaxy!"

"Couldn't you ask Starfleet Headquarters?"

"I suppose I could," Sarek answered slowly, "but there again, I would have to give a valid reason for my request. I hardly think they'd be impressed by a dream, no matter how vivid."

"Maybe if you ask T'Pol. You could explain to her. I know she'll regard the whole thing as illogical, but she'll listen to you. She respects Spock, and I'm sure she's fond of him in her own way. She could contact Starfleet. She's done it before when Spock's life was in danger."

Sarek nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. Yes, I could do that." He rose and entered his study. Several minutes later he re-entered the living room, and at the look on his face, Amanda rushed to his side.

"Sarek, what is it? Did you reach T'Pol?"

For answer, he laid gentle hands on her shoulders and drew her towards him. "I'm afraid there has been a further development. It seems we are not the only ones who had a restless night."

She searched his face with anguished eyes. "You mean...T'Pol too?"

"T'Pol too. She's placing a call to Starfleet Command now."

"Oh, Sarek, I'm frightened."

He slid his arms round her and held her close. "I know. I know. To be perfectly honest...so am I."

He could say those words to his wife now, and know them to be true. He was deeply afraid for his son.

PART SEVEN

"Well, we certainly canna' tak' a landing party doon there!" Scotty stared at the seething mass depicted on the viewscreen. "Anything of interest to be found on that planet is just going to have to stay there!"

The planet in question was the first of the system, designated Alandra on the star chart. It didn't take sensors to determine that the whole planet was a pulsating volcano, inimical to any form of humanoid life.

"Mr. Chekov, take us out of orbit."

"Aye, sir... Sir, the next planet is Almiridian. Do we avoid it and go on to the next?"

Scotty sat back and considered. "No, Chekov. Take us to Almiridian."

"But Mr. Scott," exclaimed a horrified Uhura, "I thought we weren't going anywhere near that planet!"

"Relax, Uhura, we're not. I just want to have a look at it. We can use the sensors from pretty close range. Maybe they'll tell us something. If we can find the smallest scrap of evidence to substantiate our story, it'll go down a lot better with Starfleet."

"Sorry, Scotty," apologised Uhura. "I should have known better."

"That's all right, lass. We'll all a bit on edge over this business."

On close inspection, Almiridian didn't look at all formidable. Quite the

reverse, in fact. Much of the planet was covered with lush vegetation and large expanses of water. Sensors revealed a fairly normal nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere, and, though the surface temperature was a little high for Human comfort, it would suit vulcanoid races admirably, if a trifle humid. And it was uninhabited!

Under normal circumstances the planet would have been a prize find. All of which did nothing to raise the spirits of the bridge crew. The present circumstances were far from normal, and they'd have much preferred to find a barren wasteland. As it was, Starfleet was going to take a very dim view of their boycott of this veritable paradise.

"Take us in closer, Sulu. Chekov, keep on those sensors. We're looking for any sign of previous habitation...specifically an abandoned spaceship."

"Yes, sir," acknowledged Chekov, without removing his eyes from the viewer at Spock's station.

"Sir," Sulu began, "what if we don't find the ship just by using the sensors?"

"We keep on lookin', laddie! It's got to be down there somewhere."

"Bones, there's really no reason why I have to stay here now. I feel fine," Kirk protested loudly, sitting up in the bed to which he had been confined some hours earlier.

"Let me be the judge of that. Who's the doctor around here, anyway? I'll tell you when you feel fine!" admonished McCoy crustily as he pushed his recalcitrant patient back against the pillows.

"But I should be on the bridge! Starfleet could call back any time now!"

"So Spock can deal with them. He's quite capable."

"Correction, Doctor. Mr. Scott is at present in command, but I am quite sure that he also is 'quite capable'."

McCoy turned gratefully to Spock as he stepped into the room. "Spock, thank goodness. Will you try to persuade him to stay put? I'm not having much success." Halting at the door, he added, "And please try to be a bit more forceful than the last time. I don't want him vanishing to the bridge the minute my back's turned."

Kirk glared at the doctor's retreating figure until the doors closed behind him, then plumped himself back into the pillows in disgust. "He fusses too much!"

"Perhaps. He worries about you...as I do." The last words were barely audible, causing Kirk to forget his irritation and regard his friend concernedly.

"Spock...I'm sorry. We haven't really had much chance to talk about this situation, have we?"

Spock sank down onto the edge of the bed wearily, and stared into nothingness, till Kirk reached out and laid a hand lightly on his arm. "Are you all right?"

Raising haunted eyes to Kirk's, Spock murmured quietly, "Yes. Yes, I am all right. It's just... Jim, we have to talk. This whole situation is...impossible!"

His voice caught and Kirk realised that at that moment his friend was in much greater need of help than he himself was, and he felt momentarily at a loss, wondering whether to summon McCoy. Spock seemed to sense his intent, and smiled slightly, shaking his head. "No, Jim. It will not be necessary to call Dr. McCoy. I am not ill. I am, however, extremely...ill at ease."

"Spock, there's no need. Whatever Starfleet says, no-one on this ship is going down to Almiridian."

Shaking his head slightly, Spock went on. "No, Jim, you misunderstand. I know you will not send anyone on this particular survey. That is not what concerns me. What does concern me is what could happen in the future. This... vision...has served to prepare us, in a way, for what must inevitably happen."

"What do you mean?" Kirk asked guardedly.

"You know what I mean, Jim." He gazed steadily into Kirk's eyes. "Don't you?"

Kirk nodded slowly, instinctively tightening his grip on Spock's arm. "Yes. Yes, I know. It's just...I don't want to think about it at the moment."

Spock reached out and took hold of Kirk's shoulders, shaking him gently. "Jim, that won't help. You can't run away from the truth. You and I are close... perhaps too close. I know neither of us sought to become so dependent on the other, but we can't change things now, nor would we wish to." He stopped to collect his thoughts. There was so much to say, but how to say it? "We both experienced the same nightmare. We both heard the tape I left for you. Jim... a similar copy of that tape lies, at this moment, in the safe in my quarters."

"A copy?"

"Maybe that is the wrong word. The...original, would perhaps be a better term to describe it. I recorded it some time ago, shortly after Dr. McCoy and I listened to your last message during the Tholian episode." He smiled a little at the memory of that incident. "You did know, of course, that we had played that tape, though we both denied it at the time?"

Kirk returned the smile. "Of course I knew. But Spock, what do you mean about the tape? Your tape?"

"That incident, when I thought we had lost you, brought home to me the fact that either one of us could be killed at any time. There is no need for pretence between us. We both know perfectly well the effect of one's death on the other. I...wanted to help, if I could. So I followed your example and recorded a message to you." He paused fractionally, then, "You heard that message last night, although in that particular instance, the content was...somewhat extended, to encompass the specific circumstances."

Kirk felt himself colouring slightly as he thought back to the words Spock had spoken in that message.

"Jim, I'm sorry if I've embarrassed you. It is always...difficult...to put into words one's innermost feelings towards another. Especially in the case of the relationship between two males. One's feelings are apt to be...misconstrued by a third party."

"Misconstrued? Oh, I see what you mean. But surely no-one could seriously think that...?"

"No? Would you have wanted a witness to our...reunion...earlier on, when you flung yourself, sobbing, into my arms?"

Kirk's flush deepened considerably as he stared at his friend uncertainly, and Spock smiled. "I'm sorry, Jim. That was unfair. But you do see what I mean?"

Kirk grinned suddenly, throwing a friendly punch at the Vulcan. "Yes, my friend. I know exactly what you mean. I'm just surprised that the thought occurred to you. Besides, there was a witness. Bones was still there."

"Ah yes, the good doctor. Strangely, I can't think of him as merely...a witness or third party. He's so much a part of our lives that I tend to regard him as... 'part of the furniture' is, I believe, the appropriate term?"

"Spock, it's not strange at all. The three of us seem to belong together, and I know you feel that too."

"Yes, Jim, I do. Unfortunately, after last night, McCoy now also knows how I feel." He straightened and looked steadily at Kirk. "All of which brings us back to the main point of this conversation, Jim. Somehow we have to face the fact that, sooner or later, one of us is going to have to go on without the other. You have just faced, and accepted, my death. I know it was not real, but you were convinced for a while that it was true, and you did eventually come to terms with the situation. I need to be sure that, in the event, you will accept - and

go on without me."

Kirk looked away, biting his lips. He'd realised, of course, what this had been leading up to, but his whole being shrank away from such a possibility. With slow deliberation, he forced himself to consider Spock's words. He had come to terms with his friend's death - eventually. But the remembered pain and anguish he had endured in the days following his death returned with brutal force, tearing him apart. The fingers of his hand dug spasmodically into Spock's arm. Dimly he became aware of the gentle, insistent voice, and willed himself to listen.

"Jim - listen to me. Think of that message I left for you. Concentrate on that. What I said was perfectly true. You won't be alone, I promise you. The bond between us is too strong to be broken - even by death. Please believe that!"

A sigh escaped Kirk's lips as he relaxed and let his head rest on Spock's shoulder, the words of that precious tape washing over him.

/You brought an end to my long years of loneliness and taught me the meaning of the word love. When I was a child, I longed for a brother.

You became that brother.

I do not wish to think of you, shutting yourself away somewhere, grieving for me.

My physical being is at an end, but that which you call the spirit, the soul, will remain at your side always.

Jim, my dearest friend, my brother; I'm sure you know this, but I feel I have to say it this one time.

I love you./

An eternity seemed to pass, before he answered quietly, "I think...I do believe it. But...Spock, I don't want to have to put it to the test. I've hoped and prayed that if - when - death claimed us, we would be taken together." He raised his head, and his eyes met the pain-filled ones of his friend. "I will promise to try to do what you ask of me...though I would wish that I be the first one to die."

The words were out before he could stop them, and seemed to hang in the air between them. Horror-stricken, he attempted to make amends. "Oh Spock, what am I saying? I'm sorry. I'm so wrapped up with my own feelings, I haven't even considered yours. It would be so much worse for you. I have...others I can turn to for comfort.. But you...Spock, please forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, my friend. If I am to be honest, I have to admit I have wished the same thing."

The two sat in silence, each lost in his own thoughts, then Kirk murmured, "We haven't really resolved anything, have we?"

"No. Perhaps there really isn't any way to prepare ourselves for...death. Maybe you were right in the first place. It is better not to think about it. It's just that I wanted... No, Jim, you are right; let's just forget it."

Kirk nodded agreement. "We'll just have to hope that the question won't arise for a good many years yet." He leaned back against the pillows and looked at Spock. "There's one good thing to have come out of all this."

"There is?"

"Come on. You yourself admitted that there's no need for pretence between us, so stop it. You know what I mean."

A smile played about Spock's lips. "Yes, I know. It is a great pity that under normal circumstances we would never have been able to...acknowledge... what we feel for each other."

"I wonder why that is," mused Kirk. "It's quite normal for a man to tell a woman he loves her and vice versa. But for a man to confess to feeling love for another man -- that would never do!"

"Yes. A great pity. And yet we both know it to be true. In that taped message, I found it very easy to express my feelings for you, because I knew I would not be physically present when you heard the words. But at this moment, although we both know the truth of those words, I doubt very much if I could bring myself to actually say them."

Kirk took Spock's hands in his as he said softly, "That's what I meant. The one good thing about this...vision...is that now I know how you feel. I don't have to wait until it's too late to find out that you feel as I do."

Although they both realised that no further words were necessary, nevertheless Kirk felt the need, just once, to say what was in his heart. He lay silently for several seconds, trying to think of the right words to convey his feelings without embarrassing the Vulcan. At length he looked up and said simply, "You never met my brother Sam, did you? I loved him, I suppose, as much as any man can love his brother. But what I felt for him was as nothing to what I feel for you. No man has ever loved his brother more than I love you."

"Whoops, sorry! Am I interruptin' something?"

Both men looked up to find McCoy grinning wickedly at them, hands clasped behind his back.

Feeling a red tide creeping up his neck, Kirk challenged, "Bones, how long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough! Aren't you glad it was me who came in, instead of M'Benga or Christine?"

"I don't know what you mean!"

"Liar! Anyway, you know your secret's safe with me."

Spock's voice dripped ice as he observed, "I'm sure we are both gratified to hear that, Doctor."

McCoy looked at him uncertainly. "Now just a minute, Spock."

"Yes, Doctor?" An eyebrow rose questioningly.

Looking from one to the other, McCoy burst out, "Hell, it was only a joke... I didn't mean... Jim, for heaven's sake, you know I didn't mean it!"

"Mean what, Bones?" Kirk asked innocently.

"What... Oh, come on now, Jim. I wish I hadn't started the damned thing in the first place."

Kirk relented at the doctor's obvious distress and smiled. "It's O.K., Bones. We know you didn't mean anything untoward. We're both quite well acquainted with your perverted sense of humour."

Breathing a sigh of relief, McCoy relaxed and sat on the other side of the bed. "How do you feel now?"

"Fine. And don't tell me I don't! I know how I feel."

The grin flashed back to the doctor's face. "O.K. Jim, I believe you. But you did need rest. You were still very tense the last time I was here. I'm glad to see that tension seems to have disappeared. I think I can safely let you out of here, but I warn you, take it easy. You've still got a couple of cracked ribs, so don't start doing any work-outs in the gym!"

"Oh, I think I can safely promise that. I don't feel that fine."

McCoy grunted. "Huh. I'm glad to see Spock managed to keep you here this time, anyway. Been having a heart to heart?"

"You could say that." Kirk glanced at the Vulcan, then dropped his eyes to examine his finger nails closely. "Er...Bones... What you said when you came in."

"Now Jim, I thought I explained all that. It wasn't meant seriously. For heaven's sake forget it. It was just a joke!"

"I know. I know. But...Bones, you know Spock and me better than anyone."

"Yes, I suppose so. Why?"

Kirk shifted uncomfortably. "Have you, at any time...er...thought that there was more to our...relationship...than we would be prepared to admit?"

McCoy stared at them both for several seconds considering the question, then a wide grin split his face. "You mean, did I think you were shaking up together?"

Taken aback, Kirk spluttered, "Y...you don't mince words, do you?"

"I never saw the point of pussy-footin' round anything. Speak your mind, that's what I always believed."

"Well...did you?"

"You're serious, aren't you?" At Kirk's nod, McCoy thought for a moment, then commenced. "To be perfectly honest, I have to confess... Yeah, the thought crossed my mind once or twice in the beginning. It was obvious, right from the start, that there was a lot more than mere friendship between the two of you - a very special bond. But it was none of my business - still isn't."

"Still isn't, Doctor?" Spock put in quietly. "Are we to assume, by that observation, that you still have doubts?"

McCoy leaned back, clasping his hands round his knee, and surveyed the two men before him. "No, Spock, that's not what I meant. It was a plain statement of fact. I just happen to believe that people's private lives are just that - private. No one else's business. For what it's worth, no, I never really believed that your relationship had progressed to a...physical one."

He looked pointedly from one to the other. "Whilst we're hell bent on embarrassing each other, you've had your turn, now can I ask the counterpart of the same question? Just to set my mind at rest. As I said, it isn't any of my business, but have you ever...I mean...are you...hell, you know what I mean!"

Kirk and Spock exchanged glances, then Kirk shouted with laughter. "Bones - Bones, whatever happened to 'speaking your mind'?"

McCoy got to his feet uncomfortably, feeling a flush staining his cheeks. "Well...I do...normally...but there are times when...well..."

With a reproving glance at Kirk, Spock came to McCoy's rescue. "We understand...Bones. To answer your question, no, our relationship has never been a physical one, nor is there the slightest possibility that it ever could be so."

McCoy let out a relieved breath. "I'm glad. I guess I'm just the old-fashioned type at heart, and although I do honestly believe that what people do with their lives is their own concern, I would have been...disappointed, had it been otherwise."

Any further discussion was halted by the voice of Uhura, issuing from the intercom. "Red alert! Red alert! This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill."

Kirk was out of bed in a single bound, and over to the intercom. "Kirk to bridge. Scotty, what the hell's going on?"

"Sorry, sir. There wasn't time to contact you - it was on us before we even noticed it!"

"Noticed what, for heaven's sake? Calm down man, and explain."

"Yes, sir. A Klingon cruiser just popped out of nowhere. Our sensors

certainly didn't detect it, but it's there now all right. Large as life!"

Kirk froze. "Klingons? Any contact? Any sign of hostile action?"

"No, sir. They're just...sitting there!"

Kirk turned quickly to Spock. "Spock, get up there and see what's going on." He turned back to the intercom. "O.K., Scotty, maintain red alert. Mr. Spock's on his way, and I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Right, sir."

"Bones!"

Kirk smiled as the doctor approached with a fresh uniform. "Isn't it lucky," he drawled, "I always keep a spare set of clothes for you and Spock down here? It's amazing the number of times you both seem to need one."

"Thanks, Bones," replied Kirk, shrugging into his shirt. "That's all we need right now! Klingons!"

PART EIGHT

"Captain."

Kirk looked up sharply. "Yes, Spock. What have you found?"

"That's just it, Captain. Nothing."

"Nothing! Explain."

"I...cannot, sir. According to sensor readings, there is no ship out there."

He looked at the viewscreen and Kirk followed his gaze. The outline of the Klingon cruiser stood out starkly against the backdrop of stars.

"That doesn't make sense. It's there! We can all see it!"

"Affirmative. Yet the sensors state quite definitely that it is not there. I have checked and re-checked. The sensors are not malfunctioning. I...am at a loss to explain it, Captain."

"Could they have some form of cloaking device?"

"It is possible. However, it would be most illogical for them to show themselves so blatantly whilst operating a cloaking device. That would rather defeat the object."

"Yes, I know. But what other explanation is there?"

"Maybe it is not there," suggested Chekov brightly.

"And maybe you should report to sickbay for an eye test, laddie."

Kirk smiled at Scotty's retort, and regarded the young ensign thoughtfully. "I...suppose it is possible that we're all under some sort of mass hallucination. This whole thing's so incredible to start with, anything's possible!"

"Unlikely, Captain."

Kirk sighed. "Yes, Spock, I agree. All right, for the moment, we maintain red alert. I don't intend to take any chances if we're dealing with Klingons."

He leaned back to study the Klingon vessel that 'wasn't there'. This whole mission was rapidly taking on the proportions of some bizarre cosmic joke.

"Captain, there's a message coming in from Starfleet Command."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Put it on the screen."

"Captain Kirk."

Kirk straightened as he recognised Admiral Norvack. They'd certainly referred the situation to the highest levels. He inclined his head in acknowledgement. "Admiral Norvack."

"Captain, I have in front of me a...somewhat scathing report from Commodore Wengel."

"Yes, sir. If you would allow me to explain..."

"One moment, Captain. I have also had a direct communication from T'Pol of Vulcan. It seems she gives credence to your...premonition."

"T'Pol?" Kirk looked across at his First Officer, who rose from his viewer and came to join him. "Did she give a reason for her communication, sir?"

"She did. It would appear that she...and your parents, Commander Spock - " he glanced in the Vulcan's direction " - shared your experience. In view of the unusual circumstances, I accept your decision to avoid direct contact with Almiridian, but would suggest that you execute a close sensor scan."

"Thank you, sir. We are in fact orbiting the planet at this moment, in an attempt to substantiate our...conviction."

"Good. Good. Any luck?"

"No, sir, not so far," admitted Kirk regretfully. "There is just one more thing, Admiral. We...appear to have a Klingon cruiser off our port bow, although it doesn't register on our sensors."

"Doesn't register! You do seem to be having an eventful mission. There certainly shouldn't be any Klingons in that sector. We've had no reports of any recently, but you are advised, of course, to take all precautions."

"Of course, sir. And...thank you."

"Please submit a full report of your findings relating to Almiridian. Starfleet out."

Kirk and Spock exchanged glances. "T'Pol?"

"Indeed, Captain. I rather expected my parents to have been affected, but T'Pol is...another matter entirely."

"Well, thank goodness she was. It's certainly eased the situation with Starfleet." He examined his First Officer. "This whole thing is unbelievable. Why should so many people be subjected to this...vision? I could understand better if it were just myself, or your parents. But ten - eleven, if you include yourself. Why?"

"Unknown, Captain." Spock looked away in embarrassment. "It does seem a little extreme. No one person's life is so important as to affect the lives of so many people over such a vast distance."

"That depends on the person," answered Kirk softly.

"Sir!"

Kirk turned. "Yes, Mr. Chekov."

"Sensors are now registering the Klingon ship. I can't understand it, sir. There was nothing - then suddenly...it was there!"

Spock moved quickly to take over.

"Well?" queried Kirk from behind his shoulder.

"The ensign is quite correct, sir, but there is something wrong. The sensors definitely register the ship, but if they are to be believed, there are no life forms on that vessel."

"No... But that's impossible! Klingons don't just...abandon ship!"

"Nevertheless, that would seem to be the case. Unless..." He stopped.

"Unless what?"

"This is of course pure speculation, but perhaps the Klingons sent down a landing party to Almiridian. If there is a...plague...down there, they could

have taken it back to the ship. Nothing of this hypothetical virus is knownn therefore..."

"It could also be fatal to Klingons! Yes, of course. But...how would that explain the fact that we couldn't pick up the ship on sensors?"

"It wouldn't, of course. However, assuming that they have acquired a cloaking device, which would explain it, evidently someone switched it off."

"But you said there were no life forms registering."

"Affirmative. There are now no life forms registering."

"I get it. The last person to survive switched off the device. Why?"

"Unknown. Perhaps he intended to warn us, or request help, but...left it too late. However, as I pointed out, this is all speculation."

"Of course. But it would explain a hell of a lot."

They gazed in silence at the Klingon ship, then Kirk continued, "So what do we do now? We can't just leave a Klingon cruiser hanging about in space. Somehow we have to find out what happened. Any suggestions?"

"Obviously, someone is going to have to beam across to investigate."

"No!"

The word rang round the bridge, and Spock moved closer to Kirk's side to say urgently, "Jim, there is no other way. You said yourself, we can't just leave the Klingon vessel there. We must know the situation. This is no longer just a question of avoiding Almiridian, now that Klingons are involved."

Kirk hesitated in an agony of indecision. Spock was right, of course. It was no longer just a question of keeping his friend out of harm's way. With the Klingon involvement it was now imperative that they find out just why that ship was hanging there apparently deserted. But what of the Vulcan? He'd promised him that no-one would set foot on Almiridian, and he was now faced with the alarming prospect of beaming someone from his ship onto the stricken Klingon vessel which, in effect, amounted to the same thing.

"Jim."

Kirk looked round registering McCoy's presence.

"Jim, Spock's right. We can't risk leaving a Klingon cruiser in Federation space. We don't have a choice."

"Don't you think I know that?" He looked from one to the other of his two friends, his gaze locking with Spock's for a long moment. "No. No, there has to be another way. There's got to be!"

McCoy let out a sigh that was a mixture of apprehension and profound relief; apprehension for the precariousness of Jim's position in Starfleet over this business, and relief that the Vulcan was not to be exposed in any way to the deadly virus. He had long since given up trying to analyse exactly what his feelings were towards Spock, accepting only that he was an important part of his life. The sigh was echoed by the rest of the bridge crew, as the tension engendered by their superior officers' conversation abruptly dissipated.

Glancing at each of his colleagues in turn, Scotty approached the trio. "Captain, sir, I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say, thank you. We're all behind you. None of us would ha' wanted to do anything that would endanger Mr. Spock's life. I'm verrea much afraid ye might hae had a mutiny on your hands if you'd decided to send anyone across there."

Kirk looked round the bridge, his eyes moist, at the murmurs of assent from the others. "I'm...grateful for your support. Thank you."

During this exchange, the object of their discussion had stood rigidly, staring straight ahead, trying desperately to maintain his Vulcan mask. For the first time in his life, he found himself in imminent danger of breaking down in

public, totally unprepared for the onslaught of his own emotions at this display of unquestioning devotion from his colleagues. He felt his control slipping, his eyes stung, and with a hurried apology, he almost ran for the turbolift. As Kirk made to follow, McCoy grasped his arm. "Wait a minute, Jim. Do you think you should go after him?"

"Bones, I can't just leave him! You saw the state he was in!"

"Yes, Jim, that's exactly what I mean. He needs to be alone. He wouldn't want even you to see him like that. Please, Jim, you know I'm right. Let him handle it on his own."

Kirk looked agitatedly at the closed turbolift doors, torn between his knowledge that McCoy was right and the urge to comfort his friend. Finally he turned back to the doctor. "All right, Bones. I hate to think of him in such torment, but you're probably right." He transferred his gaze to the other four members of the bridge crew. "I know how you all feel, but, I ask you - when Mr. Spock comes back, please don't make any reference at all to this incident. He's just gone to check some data, and will be back shortly. Understood?"

Four heads nodded in complete understanding, and Kirk smiled gratefully. "Right, now to get back to the immediate problem," he commenced briskly. "Mr. Chekov, is there any change in the sensor readings from that Klingon ship?"

"No, sir. No life form readings at all."

"Hmmm... We've got to find out what's going on somehow. Scotty -- could we rig a tricorder to be operated by remote control?"

"Aye, sir." Scotty beamed enthusiastically. "That shouldna' be a problem. I'll need Mr. Spock's help for calibrating, though."

"Of course. But in the meantime...until he returns...you can get on with the mechanics of the thing."

"Aye, sir. Right away!"

"Sir, something just came into sensor range."

Kirk swung round to face Sulu. "A ship?"

Sulu studied the readings. "No, sir, I don't think so. It's too small for one thing, and there is no indication of any life forms."

"Chekov, get to the science station and check Spock's sensors."

Bent over the viewer, Chekov made his report. "It is certainly not a spaceship, sir. No atmosphere is registering at all. It seems to be some sort of robot device. A buoy of some sort." He looked up in puzzlement. "Very high energy readings, but nothing to indicate cause or intent."

"Magnification, Mr. Sulu."

The tiny speck on the viewscreen jumped forward to be revealed as a small sphere with several antennae protruding from its smooth sides. Kirk studied it closely. "These energy readings -- could they mean weapons of some kind?"

"I...do not think so, Captain. They're like nothing I've ever seen."

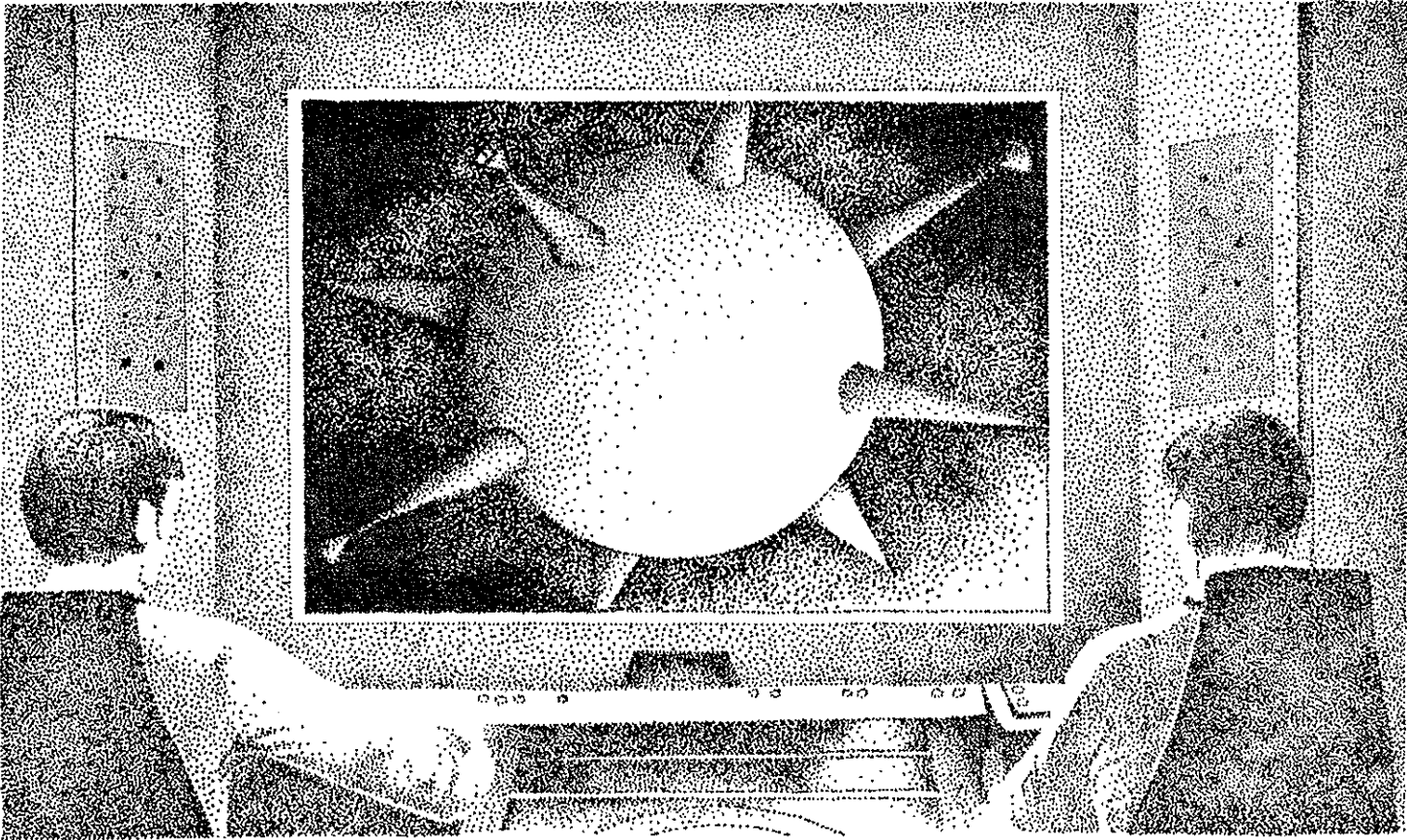
At that precise moment the turbolift doors opened and Spock stepped out onto the bridge, his eyes going at once to the screen. Kirk spared him a quick glance and breathed a sigh of relief. His First Officer was once more the efficient, logical Vulcan he always appeared to be.

"Mr. Spock, what do you make of that?"

"I know what it is, Captain," replied the Vulcan calmly.

"You know? Well, come on, man, enlighten us."

Spock folded his arms and stood gazing at the object. "That, sir, is the explanation for our collective 'nightmare'."



Kirk stared at him. "Would you mind repeating that?"

"Not at all, sir. I said - "

Kirk held up a hand. "Never mind. Just tell me - how?"

"Yes, Captain. It is a Romulan marker buoy which sends out a telepathic signal. This signal can only be picked up by the Romulans themselves - or, of course, Vulcans. It was very subtly devised, as a warning to Romulan ships, against the plague which infests the planet below. The warning comes initially in the form of a...dream. The recipient interprets the information in...various ways, insofar as it affects him individually. That was the 'nightmare' that affected us all last night. My mind picked up the telepathic signal and passed it on to the subconscious minds of the people...closest to me."

"That's incredible! But why on earth go to all that trouble? Why the hell couldn't they just leave a conventional automatic distress signal?"

"That would not fit with Romulan psychology. They are an arrogant, ruthless people, caring little for other races. They would wish to protect their own people, but..."

"Wouldn't give a damn if every other humanoid in the galaxy died from that plague!" finished Kirk disgustedly.

"Quite, Captain. I...can only apologise for the dramatic way in which the warning came across. It was not...intentional."

"Shut up, Spock. There's absolutely no need for apologies for something you were not responsible for." He looked at his First Officer consideringly. "How come you know this now? Is that thing still broadcasting?"

"Affirmative. At a specific distance from the buoy, the sensors start relaying the precise details of the danger. A sort of...confirmation...of the subconscious warning, if you like."

"So that's that! We were quite justified in not beaming down to Almiridian. What about Starfleet? Will they accept a telepathic marker buoy as evidence?"

"Oh yes, I should think so. They can always verify it, if necessary, by sending other Vulcans to this area. Besides which, there is always T'Pol's influence."

Kirk grinned. "Ah yes, T'Pol. She's already got Starfleet Command jumping through hoops. They wouldn't dare go against her!"

For once, Spock did not question his commanding officer's phraseology. With a slightly raised eyebrow, he agreed, "Quite, sir." His eyes drifted to the viewscreen where the Klingon cruiser dominated the starfield. "Which only leaves the problem of the Klingons to be resolved."

"Scotty's working on that. He's rigging a tricorder to be operated by remote control, for which, incidentally, he needs your help. If we can establish that all the Klingons are dead, we will be quite justified in vaporizing the ship, cloaking device and all, if they have one."

Spock nodded approval. "Very well, sir. I will join Mr. Scott immediately."

With his First Officer's departure, Kirk sank exhaustedly into the command chair, and was immediately aware of McCoy's eagle eye on him. He grinned sheepishly. "O.K., Bones, I know. I ought to be taking it easy."

"I'm glad you realise that," was the crusty reply. "I did warn you. You should be resting."

"I will, I will. Honestly. Just as soon as we deal with that Klingon ship."

McCoy shrugged in resignation, knowing full well that nothing would drag his Captain from the bridge until the whole thing was neatly tied up. He extracted a hypospray from the medikit and pressed it to Kirk's arm.

"What's that?" demanded Kirk suspiciously.

"Relax, Jim. I'm not going to knock you out. It's just a stimulant to keep you going for a while. Though, come to think of it, I could just as easily have pumped you full of tranquilliser."

Kirk smiled affectionately at the doctor. "Thanks, Bones. I'll try to relax, but I really must stay here till this is all over."

Returning the smile, McCoy warned, "That stimulant will only be effective for eight hours, then you'll sleep for twenty-four. So be warned!"

Kirk looked across to the library computer where Spock was bent over the viewer. In a very short space of time, Scotty and Spock had adapted a tricorder to gain the required information from the Klingon vessel, and all that remained now was to get that information and take the necessary action.

"Right, Scotty, you can beam it across now."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

An air of tense anticipation pervaded the bridge, into which broke Spock's deep, even voice. "The information is coming through the computer link now. Life support is still functioning, as are the main engines, but there is absolutely no trace of active life forms." He studied the readings for several seconds in silence, adjusting dials periodically. "There are, however, definite readings of carbon-based organisms, scattered throughout the ship." He looked up. "It is obvious from these readings that there are large numbers of dead bodies on that vessel. We cannot be 100% certain of the cause of death, but the evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of the virus down on that planet."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock. That's all I need to know. Mr. Sulu, train main phaser banks on that ship."

"Aye, aye, sir. Phasers on target."

"Fire!"

The phaser beams lanced out across the void, reducing the mass of the Klingon ship to incandescent vapour. It was almost an anti-climax after the tension of the past twenty-four hours, and Kirk leaned back contentedly. "Mr. Spock, log the co-ordinated of Almiridian into the computer together with all the relevant data appertaining to said planet. We'll let Starfleet make the decision as to what steps to take regarding future safety. My immediate inclination is to blast the whole planet out of existence!" He smiled at Spock's raised eyebrow, then directed his attention to Chekov. "Mr. Chekov, set a course for the next planet of the system. You have the co-ordinates?"

A wide grin lit up the young man's face. "Yes, sir!"

"Thank God that's over!" Kirk settled back in his chair, glass in hand, as the three friends gathered in the captain's quarters some time later.

"I'll drink to that!" agreed McCoy feelingly, with a sideways glance at the third member of the party. "Thank the Lord for the 'logical' explanation. The place wouldn't be the same without our walking computer."

Spock inclined his head, eyebrows raised. "Thank you, Doctor."

"You're welcome. After all, if you weren't here, who the hell would I find to argue with?"

"A valid point, Dr. McCoy. You do need someone to deflate your ego occasionally, I'm only too happy to oblige."

Kirk relaxed and smiled; no-one was fooling anyone. They all knew, and appreciated, how deeply Spock's 'death' had affected the doctor. Blithely ignoring the Vulcan's last remark, McCoy observed, "A highly original way of giving a warning. Those Romulans were mighty devious. I mean, if Spock here hadn't picked up that telepathic signal, we would have gone happily down there, and ended up like those unfortunate Klingons, likely as not. Of course, Humans may be immune, but I'm sure glad we didn't have to find out the hard way."

"Mmmm, yes, Bones, I agree." Kirk stifled a yawn, and McCoy looked across at him, casting a critical eye over his tired features. Setting his glass on the table, he rose to his feet. "I think it's time you turned in, Jim. That stimulant's wearing off, and I did warn you, the reaction's going to hit you like a ton of bricks!"

"Yeah, Bones, I guess I do feel a bit tired. I promise, I'll go to bed."

"Make sure you do. I'd better get along to sickbay." He stopped at the door, looking back at the two men. "Spock, I...just wanted to say...well, all joking aside, it's good to have you here...I mean... Oh, dammit, you know what I mean!"

The Vulcan allowed a faint smile to curve his lips. "Yes, Doctor, I do know what you mean. Thank you."

Swallowing the lump which suddenly rose in his throat, McCoy muttered good-night, and left. His eyes on the closed door, Kirk smiled. "Poor Bones. He just can't seem to handle really deep emotions. He always hides behind that mask of sarcasm." He transferred his gaze to Spock. "You know, basically, he's rather like you. Both of you are afraid to reveal your emotions, hiding behind your own individual masks."

Leaning forward to replace the empty glass on the table, a gasp of pain escaped him as the movement jarred his strapped up ribs. Spock rose instantly and crossed to his side. "The doctor is right. You do need rest."

Kirk nodded, getting to his feet and crossing to the bathroom. "Spock, don't go just yet, please."

"As you wish."

Spock busied himself tidying away the drinks and glasses, until Kirk emerged from the bathroom in night attire, and moved to the sleeping quarters, where he sank gratefully onto the bed. Spock followed close behind and, covering him up, sat down on the edge of the bed. Moments passed in companionable silence, both lost in their own thoughts.

At length, Kirk murmured drowsily, "Bones was right, you know. The ship wouldn't be the same without you, for any of us. Scotty meant what he said back there on the bridge. They really would have contemplated mutiny if I'd ordered anyone to beam over to the Klingon ship."

"I know, Jim. I...find that rather hard to accept. They would willingly risk their careers...for me. Why?"

Kirk forced his eyes open to regard his friend. "You know why. Because they care about you. You do know that, Spock, don't you?"

Wordlessly, Spock nodded, his throat aching with suppressed emotion, and his eyes unnaturally bright. Kirk reached out and squeezed his arm comfortingly, fighting to stay awake, and Spock smiled in reassurance. "I'm all right, Jim. Stop worrying. And stop fighting the drug! Let go, and go to sleep."

"Stay with me, Spock...please." He relaxed and closed his eyes, murmuring, "Bones was right about another thing, as well. It is good to have you here... I just can't imagine my life...without you, my friend..."

His voice gradually tailed off as the traumas and tensions of the day at last caught up with him, and he sank into an exhausted, healing sleep.

Spock gazed down on the sleeping countenance of the man he had grown to love more than any brother, absently smoothing back that elusive lock of hair as he did so, and reflected on the events of the last twenty-four hours. Jim had faced, and accepted, his death, albeit on a different plane. But what of the future? Had this experience prepared either of them, in any way, for the inevitable? Resolutely, he thrust that thought into the innermost recesses of his mind. Jim was right. It was better not to think of it. In words which his friend would use, they would 'cross that bridge when they came to it'.

Smiling gently, he reached over to turn out the light, and quietly left.

